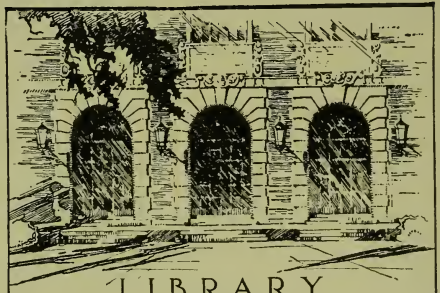
A MASQUERADER



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A MASQUERADER.

VOL. III.

A MASQUERADER

BY

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'A MOORLAND IDYL,' 'A VILLAGE HAMPDEN,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A MASQUERADER.

CHAPTER I.

DELAYED.

There was a grim smile upon the face of Mr. Elliott Whinstone as, in the evening sunlight, he trotted noiselessly over the green turf which lined the bridle roadway between Yardhope and High Feldom. He was alone, and evidently in deep contemplation. He seldom looked about him, being content with an occasional glimpse ahead to assure himself that the path was clear.

The lane was narrow and straight, being in fact the well-preserved site of an ancient highway of the Romans. On each side the hedge was thick and untrimmed, and the long, straggling arms of the dog-rose threw forward their latest blossoms to touch tenderly the elbow of the rider, only to lose roughly many of their tinted petals for their pains. Mr. Whinstone was never anything of a dreamer, and he was not likely to make experiment in such fruitless occupation to-day.

The election had gone against him, and he was now returning from the scene of popular excitement which is inseparable from the public declaration of a poll. Individual feelings are generally lost sight of upon such occasions, and unrestrained expressions of opinion freely indulged in. The people find a peculiar pleasure in

announcing in the market-place, before the very face of individuals involved, antipathetic sentiments which, as a rule, have to be gloated over in secret, and hidden beneath a flimsy garb of civility. To-day had proved no exception to the rule, and Mr. Whinstone was left with no misapprehension as to his personal position with the people.

This was not likely to trouble him. He was ambitious of a seat in parliament, of that there was no doubt; but, when it was so flagrantly thrust home to him that such an honour depended upon the good offices of a community such as this, the prize lost very much of its desirableness in his eyes. At the present moment, the mere thought of it was loathsome to him, and he thanked heaven that they disliked him as they did. To be beholden to them for anything would

not have been a comfortable reflection in his present temper.

'Where's your daughter?' the crowd had, more than once, unceremoniously asked of him; and, whether they knew it or not, they could not have found a more effectual cry wherewith to cause him irritation.

The words rang continually in his ears, mingling not only with the scene from which he was fleeing, but as much with the visionary one which lay before. He had been detained long by his political acquaintances, and, after leaving them, the ride to his residence at High Feldom was a considerable one. The evening was already advancing, and at dinner he had to meet his guests. The fact of his having made this private engagement to the exclusion of the regulation festivities with his political sup-

porters, was duly commented upon; but, since it was only of his personal presence that he was niggardly, the slight was received with mitigated censure.

To his engagement at his own dinner-table, Mr. Whinstone attached singular importance. Occasionally he was impatient with himself for being so affected by what he knew must be but a piece of idle curiosity. His dinner-party was exclusively instituted for the entertainment of Mrs. Monk, and, so far as the host himself was concerned, all the guests were merged in the personality of this one lady alone. In addition to giving himself this inordinate annoyance, he had taken other extraordinary measures for obtaining a single glimpse of this lady, (curiously none of which had as yet been attended with success,) and had, as a consequence,

aroused the suspicion of his son, just because of a ridiculous impression he had received of the similarity of her voice to that of somebody else in whom he acknowledged an interest.

He had not seen Paul that day, for, remarkable as it had certainly seemed to him, the young man had not made his appearance at the declaration ceremony; but the night before he had plainly questioned him.

'Has your friend, Mrs. Monk, accepted the invitation, Paul?'

'Yes, she has,' was the reply, bluntly given. 'But don't fear,' Paul would have added, 'it's all over, old boy. You need not be curious.'

The mere manœuvre about similarity of voice had not deceived such a shrewd fellow as Paul. There was nothing singu-

lar to him in the fact of his father strongly desiring to meet the lady, to say nothing of the niece, although the parent evidenly thought differently.

The reflections which this lady's personality prompted were far-reaching, and, in mere point of time, carried the gentleman back some quarter-of-a-century. He was not exactly a young man even then, for, as we know, he had at the present time already surmounted the grand climacteric ; but, in the retrospect, it appeared to Mr. Whinstone that he was reviewing the far-off days of his youth—days of hopes and speculations so ridiculously incompatible with those which he felt to actuate him now that they seemed to appertain to an altogether different individual.

Sometimes a single word or a set phrase would recur to him, darting like

an arrow from these visions of the past. It would assume the form of a rhythmic iteration, keeping time to the measure of the horse, and for the time constituting a little universe of its own, from which all else of a more general nature was rigidly excluded. At such times Mr. Whinstone grew careless of his rein, but, as the horse was a trusty one, it mattered little. He was not an experienced rider, and did not trust himself upon such a steed as would alone satisfy his more accomplished son.

He was absorbed in such a reverie as he approached the end of the lane. A gateway separated it from the road beyond, and at a distance of about a hundred yards from this was a stile in the hedge. Regardless of all about him, Mr. Whinstone rode on, until close beside the gap

which marked this stile. The horse's step on the soft turf was presumably inaudible, for, just as it came to this particular point, a man leaped lightly from the hedge, and almost touched the nose of the animal. It was naturally startled, and, not immediately feeling the command of the rein, it plunged and darted forward. The rider was at once conscious of his position, and did his utmost to retrieve it; but without effect. Seeing the closed gate directly in his way, the horse made half an effort to jump it, but with the result only of flinging himself against the bars, and his rider into the road before him. The gate was shattered and the animal seriously wounded; but this did not stay its course. As it proceeded, mad with pain, its hoofs came in contact with the prostrate body, and thereby worse injuries were inflicted

than those which Mr. Whinstone had already sustained.

The man who had been the cause of the accident watched thus far, and then he ran forward to where the gentleman was lying.

'Are you alone, sir?' he said, staring excitedly into Mr. Whinstone's face. 'Where is your son?'

There was no reply.

'Can you no hear me? Where is your son the day?'

Still there was no conscious sign of hearing. After a long scrutiny of the insensible face, the man rose from the ground, and muttering, 'You canna be dead,' he hurried off to the nearest cottage, which was half-a-mile away.

This accident had occurred at a lonely

part of the road, about three miles from the village of High Feldom, and, before any news of it had reached the Hall, Mr. Whinstone's guests were already assembled. Apologies for the host's absence were readily accepted, for in the face of his political engagements it was in no way remarkable. Mrs. Monk and Miss Langtoft were amongst the earliest to arrive, and both appeared to be in a particularly genial temper.

'It is very kind of Mr. Whinstone to think of giving us his company upon such an occasion,' said Mrs. Monk, graciously, whilst conversing with the hostess. 'I am afraid that some of his colleagues will feel that we are unfairly depriving them of his company.'

'Oh, do not fear that, my dear Mrs. Monk,' replied Mrs. Whinstone, with a

confidential glance. 'Paul says—but you know what a boy he is!—he says that his father prefers the pleasure of his friends' company here to that of his political——'

'I see,' laughed Mrs. Monk, in response to a significant look which had quite intelligibly concluded the lady's sentence. 'And that we are here to enable him to escape from unpleasant engagements elsewhere.'

'Hush!' said the hostess, with unusual pleasantry for her. 'You know what a boy he is.'

Paul, who was displaying quite a remarkable degree of vivacity to his friends, had just secured Mr. Alan Kidland, who, with his mother and sister, had recently arrived.

'Guv'nor not got back yet?' said Alan.

'You've had enough of it—eh, old man? Ha, ha, ha!'

Paul joined in the laugh, but made no verbal answer.

'Was there much row? Much abuse, brickbats, and little things of that sort? Was there now? Really, I don't know. I've not heard a word about it.'

'You know about as much as I do, then,' replied Paul; 'for I didn't go down.'

Alan raised his eyebrows, and drew up his lips.

'Honour bright? Well, you are a chap! I say, Walter,'—Kidland caught his friend Selby, who was passing,—'look here, this fellow has slipped them. Hasn't even shown the natural respect due to a parent, to say nothing of the duty to his

party and that sort of thing. By what words can I mark my sense of—of horror at such scandalous behaviour?'

Selby, who was a thin-faced, thoughtful-looking young gentleman, with a very dark moustache, fixed a pair of grave, reproachful eyes full upon the face of the culprit's, and muttered, 'I am surprised at you.' Then he passed on, and was speedily captured by the hostess.

'Oh, how is Sir Robert to-day, my dear Walter?'

'About the same, thank you, Mrs. Whinstone.'

In the face of his uncle's prolonged illness, Mr. Selby found it absolutely necessary to have some definite formula wherewith to satisfy innumerable inquiries, and from the outset he had adopted the above as the simplest and least compromising.

'Oh, I am so sorry. He was such an active man that he will feel so very much this long confinement.'

'Yes, he does.'

Whilst they talked, Margaret, accompanied by an old gentleman wearing an eyeglass, came up to them.

'Isn't this awkward, mamma?'

'It is, my dear. Have you asked Paul what he thinks about it?'

'He thinks we ought not to wait any longer.'

Mrs. Whinstone was in favour of just a few minutes more, and then Margaret turned towards Mr. Selby.

The young lady was brilliant to-night, being no doubt greatly exhilarated by the universal attention which she was receiving. The interest attaching to her had not yet worn off amongst the generality

of people who did not see her very frequently. She was viewed with considerable curiosity as an uncommon animal, and, it must be admitted, with not a little sympathy. Exactly as she herself would have desired, the gentlemen especially were drawn to her, and, moreover, they did not show any alteration in their attitude when they came to inspect her more closely. She could talk to them readily enough upon any topic, and her appearance was decidedly attractive.

'Decent girl; pretty little figure, too,' was the general comment.

Miss Whinstone, too, seemed anxious to-night to impress upon all the fact of her being still in the market. To Mr. Kidland she had been polite, but nothing more. To Mr. Selby just now she was every bit as attentive, and he appeared

fully to appreciate her condescension. His thoughtful eyes would betray quite a pleasurable gleam as they looked at close quarters into hers, and Margaret was sufficiently awake to perceive it. But his nature was by no means such a transparent one as that of Mr. Kidland, so that the young lady bore herself towards him very differently.

'There's Walter expounding agricultural reform to your sister,' remarked Alan, facetiously, at the other end of the room.

'Yes, I like your country immensely,' Margaret was saying at the same moment to her companion; 'but what strikes one so much is the barrenness of it. It seems so grieving that all these miles of hills should produce nothing except a few sheep.'

Mr. Selby's eyes were alight instantly.

'Has that struck you, Miss Whinstone?' he asked, in astonishment. 'I thought that thought was my own property. It is —what was your word?—yes, grieving, very grieving; and the worst of it is that it is quite unnecessary.'

At once Margaret showed the deepest interest.

'Unnecessary, Mr. Selby? How is that? Do tell me.'

'Well, I can hardly as yet explain the whole principle to you, but the thing is clear enough in my own mind. If you won't say anything,—I want it secret, you know, at present,—I am writing a paper on that very subject, which I shall read to the Agricultural Society some day. It amazes me that the thing has never been thought of before.'

'How very interesting, Mr. Selby! But you make me so curious to know more about it.'

'You are the first person, Miss Whinstone, that I have been able to find in the least interested in the subject,' replied Walter, with a display of most extreme gratification. 'I will bring the paper up here some day, and we will read as much as I have done. Would you like me to? Really? You might give me some new ideas on the subject.'

The project was charming to Margaret beyond expression, and even such attempt as she could make to show how she was enraptured by the suggestion was cut short by the untimely appearance of Mr. Kidland at her elbow.

'Has anything happened, Miss Whinstone?' this gentleman said, with his accus-

tomed twinkle. 'Any boiler exploded? Fish-kettle upset, or any trifle of that sort?'

'We are only waiting for my father,' replied Margaret, doing her utmost to repress her convulsive giggle.

'Oh, is that all? Melrose fetched Paul so mysteriously, and put on such a long face, that I thought perhaps he wanted him to run for some mutton-chops.'

At this they all gave free vent to their laughter.

In a minute or two, however, it appeared that there was more in Mr. Kidland's surmises than had at first seemed probable. Something unusual evidently had happened. People were whispering together and asking questions. Paul had just come within the doorway, and beckoned an old gentleman from the room. Presently the

latter re-entered, and walked across to where the hostess was sitting.

'A slight accident it seems, Eleanor, on the road,' he said, in an undertone, to the lady. 'Mr. Whinstone will not be able to join us to-night. Will you come and see Paul in the library?'

The lady jumped up with surprising alacrity, and placed her hand in the old gentleman's arm which was politely offered to her. A passage was instantly made for them to the door, and they went out.

'Whatever is it?' asked Margaret at random, and, receiving but indefinite answers, she too left the room.

Mrs. Whinstone's informant in a minute or two returned, and briefly explained the situation to the guests assembled. Their host was most dangerously injured by a fall from his horse, so dangerously that at

present his recovery was a question. They must all, of course, therefore at once disperse; but Mrs. Whinstone urgently requested them to take some refreshment in the dining-room before leaving. As most of them had a very long way to drive, this request was acquiesced in, and many withdrew forthwith for the purpose.

Mrs. Monk was not one of them. The news seemed to have confounded her, and, when Clare went up to talk to her about it, she could get no answer at all. Disregarding her niece's presence, the lady suddenly walked across to the gentleman, who had acted as spokesman in the matter, and drew him aside.

'Is he dead?' she asked, fiercely.

'Oh, no, madam,' replied the gentleman, surprised; 'it is quite possible that he will recover; but he is gravely injured and

quite unconscious, even yet. It occurred at such an out-of-the-way place that he was too long in having proper assistance.'

Mrs. Monk then drew back, and seemed engaged in thought. Clare again approached her.

'Aunt, hadn't we better go.'

There was an uncertainty and diffidence about Clare's voice which was unusual in her. She was wholly taken aback by her aunt's behaviour. Not only were her mere actions so remarkably unlike her, but her face was transformed. Clare felt flung back to an immeasurable distance by the look which was cast upon her. This was a being that she knew not—with whom she had not one chord to connect her. Twenty years of homely intercourse with this aunt—this being out of all the world whom alone she had ever loved,—

were severed, annihilated, in an instant. She did not know her. It was not horror, —nor fright,—nor sympathy,—nor any ordinary sentiment recognizable to Clare which Mrs. Monk's face depicted. Any of such would have raised some surprise in the mind of Clare, for she had regarded her aunt as almost entirely unemotional; but this look had terrified her. She felt as though her own life were suddenly shattered, and that she was flung alone to the homeless winds. If she knew her aunt no better than this, then was she lonely indeed.

At a repetition of her question Mrs. Monk looked at her, once more as of old, —but Clare shrank nevertheless,—what had been done was irrevocable.

'Yes, Clare, in a few minutes. I must see poor Mrs. Whinstone first.'

As the lady left the room she encountered Margaret, and begged her to come with her to the library.

'There is nobody in there?'

The young lady shook her head.

'I am shocked to hear this, Miss Whinstone,' Mrs. Monk began, with unmistakable sympathy. 'Can I not do anything to be of help to you?'

'I think not, Mrs. Monk, thank you,' replied Margaret, throwing off much of the restraint with which she generally regarded this lady.

'Is it really of such a serious nature?'

'Yes. I am afraid so.'

'What a shock for your poor mother! You must let me do something. How will she get a nurse?'

The thought had not occurred to Margaret.

'Can you see her without trouble? Run and ask her. If she has no particular one in her mind, beg her to let me get her one. I must do something to be of use to her. I personally know of one that would suit her excellently. Will you ask her?'

'Oh, it is so kind of you, Mrs. Monk. I don't think she has thought of it, and of course she can't do it all herself. If you will stay here, please, I will be back in a minute.'

'How I have misjudged her!' thought Margaret, as she ran up the stairs. 'It *is* kind of her.'

The young lady returned to say how gladly her mother would avail herself of Mrs. Monk's offer. She herself knew of none, and it was such a risk to have one without personal recommendation.

'Mrs. Whinstone is right, my dear. You can never depend upon them, even from the very best institution. So much depends upon the habits and temperament of a nurse. They may be efficient enough in their work, but very difficult to get on with; or ladylike and incapable.'

'Yes, it is so,' replied Margaret, from her mature experience of the race of nurses.

As soon as Mrs. Monk's carriage could be fetched from the Peel for her, she and Clare departed.

'I shall go to town to-night, Clare.'

'To-night!'—but, after all, Clare could not be greatly surprised at anything.

'Yes. I can catch the night train on the main line.'

No doubt Mrs. Monk perceived the im-

pression she had already unintentionally made, and deemed it best to be brief. Time alone could offer explanations to such an one as Clare. But, when she was saying good-bye a short time later, apparently she repented.

'You are an impressionable child, Clare,' she said, in her old, sprightly way. 'We shall have a good laugh over this some day.'

Clare doubted it, but nevertheless felt more comfortable for the words.

It was not until the following evening that the nurse arrived at Feldom Hall.

CHAPTER II.

PAUL SEES A STOAT.

For the first time since her childish days, Clare awoke the following morning with an indefinite sense of uneasiness upon her spirits; and it took her a moment to reduce the vague perception to the practical limits of its cause.

It was not yet seven, and, before descending, the young lady sat by her open window to gather what exhilaration she might from the early prospect. Her eyes travelled from the dapple, eastern sky,

where the sun was temporarily obscured, over the ridge of tinted moorland before her, and on to the dark pine-wood in the west. Then the voice of a boy, driving a couple of cows along the road, attracted her, but the Arcadian simplicity of it was somewhat marred by her hearing distinctly a furious oath proceed from the youthful reprobate, and seeing him fling a stone at one of the animals lingering to bite the grass by the road-side. When these had passed, a wagon laden with hay succeeded, the delicious fragrance from which ascended to her here, and Clare gratefully inhaled it: but, what was best of all, was the carter whistling lustily the vigorous hunting-song of 'John Peel,' the ring of which resounded far and near in the still, morning air. This perceptibly cheered her, and she went down.

The young lady sent early to inquire after Mr. Whinstone, and heard with satisfaction that he had regained consciousness and was doing as well as could be expected. Soon after breakfast, Clare received a telegram from her aunt (for which she had to pay ten shillings to a mounted messenger), announcing that lady's safe arrival in London. Miss Langtoft was standing with this in her hand, engaged in such contemplation as it inevitably gave rise to, when she saw the vicar coming hurriedly up the pathway. The sight seemed to come as a ray of gladness to her, and she immediately went out to the door to meet him.

'I only heard of it this morning,' the gentleman said, as he took Clare's hand warmly. 'It is a painful affair, but things seem to be going on all right. I have

just seen Mrs. Whinstone, and she begged me to call and tell you how much she feels Mrs. Monk's kindness. Your aunt has sent a telegram to say that the nurse will be here this evening by the five train. One does not forget kindness of this sort, Miss Langtoft.'

Clare muttered some polite acquiescence.

In truth, the same thought was with her as with Mr. Crook, and that one of blank amazement at the part which her aunt was taking in this matter. Perhaps the day might come for a hearty laugh over it, (it seemed more of a bare possibility, at any rate, in this morning sunlight, and in the genial clergyman's presence, than it had done in the twilight of the previous evening,) but the prospect seemed by no means a definite one even now.

'As Mr. Whinstone was alone, I suppose there is no explanation as to how it happened?' said Clare.

'Oh, yes, it is clear enough. Rutherford saw it all—in fact, was the innocent cause of it all—and has given full details.'

'I had heard nothing of that.'

Mr. Crook consequently proceeded to relate such account of the occurrence as he had received, and which agreed in all particulars with what we already know to have happened.

'I must say, with all Christian charity,' the clergyman went on, 'that it is peculiarly unfortunate for the man, Rutherford, that he should have been the cause of it, for you know, Miss Langtoft, what uneducated human nature is.'

'I hardly understand to what you refer, Mr. Crook.'

'Oh, you won't know anything of Rutherford, I expect. I thoroughly believe, myself, that he is a respectable young fellow, quite; but he is a rabid radical, and has, unfortunately, throughout these election proceedings, shown quite a savage antipathy towards our friends at the Hall. It was only a day or two ago that Winlaw was speaking to me about it. But don't misunderstand me, Miss Langtoft. I am not a man who says one thing and implies another. I firmly believe that anybody will do George Rutherford a wicked wrong who most distantly suggests that the thing was anything but an accident, pure and simple. We know how coincidences happen every day of our lives. I have often got over a stile myself and been startled by a horseman near at

hand on the other side. There seems nothing strange in it to me.'

'I should think not,' assented Clare. 'It is a very possible occurrence, especially when the hedge is thick and high.'

'Exactly. But I must say good-bye,' said Mr. Crook, extending his hand with his accustomed briskness. 'I hope we shall soon settle down into our jog-trot existence. This thunder in the atmosphere doesn't suit me.'

As a matter of fact, the vicar had been immured within the walls of his own dwelling since the active commencement of the political campaign, always declining to have the remotest connection with such doings.

'Must you really go, Mr. Crook? Oh, no, don't think that! I have nothing in

the world to do. You don't know what a treat it is to me to see you.'

'My dear Miss Langtoft, you are too kind to say so. Would you care for a walk to the vicarage? I would say more, seeing you are alone, but have hardly the courage. It may turn out to be the cold shoulder and mixed pickles. But, you know, if you would feel it supportable to grace an old bachelor's table at luncheon, say—dinner I call it——'

'Nothing would be more delightful,' cried Clare, with ingenuous gladness. 'I will be with you in a minute.'

The clergyman rubbed his hands in the extremity of satisfaction as he looked at the flowers in the garden. Such a piece of fortune as this he had not ventured to look for. Miss Langtoft joined him and they set off in animated conversation.

As they were passing along that very silent and sombre piece of road between the fir-woods, Clare suddenly broke the silence with an unexpected question.

'Is it inevitable, Mr. Crook, that a time should come when friends whom we think we have known with great intimacy should become a mystery to us?'

'If you mean, is there no such thing as complete absence of reserve between any two existing human beings I feel obliged to say there is not.'

'No doubt that is what I do mean,' replied Clare. 'It is a very unsatisfactory thought.'

'In a human sense it is, Miss Langtoft; but looked at from another tribunal it is satisfactory.'

'Yes,' said Clare, evidently with but a partial acquiescence.

The subject dropped, and they talked again of what seemed more immediately applicable matters; first of all the inevitable one.

'Hugh Winlaw has surprised me not a little,' the vicar had remarked.

'I should think so,' assented Clare.

'And you will hardly be surprised to hear, Miss Langtoft, that his philosophy doesn't do for me. It is precisely what I should have expected from him, that is, if I could ever have thought of his finding his tongue intellectual. But it is too transcendental for this work-a-day world. Human progress upon mere abstract principles of this sort is, I contend, shallow. It savours too much of the Latin races,—I still prefer the Teuton.'

'Yes,' said Clare.

'I shall hardly expect you to go with

me,—few of modern education would do; but for me the old forces still exist.'

'They are the only definite foundation, Mr. Crook.'

'I think so. None of this craving for an ideal, and excessively beautiful, human existence can mould a man's character; talk how they will. I am not so benighted as to consider an artistic sense necessarily an immoral one, or necessarily involving immorality; but of this I am assured that, even in its most refined development, of itself it does not necessarily implant the *moral* refinements which surely every civilization must own the need of.'

'I did not know that Winlaw's views were so far-reaching as this.'

'Nor he, as yet. But I perceive his tendency. Further study and knowledge of the world will do the rest. He'll have

to let his hair grow and wear eye-glasses.'

Clare laughed heartily at the picture suggested, as no doubt the vicar had intended her to do. Mr. Crook, from a horror of appearing to preach in private, frequently thus turned off his reflections with a joke.

'But joking apart,' continued he, 'it does seem ridiculous for him to continue herding sheep out here, doesn't it?'

'I should not like to say that. At any rate, I should think it very inconsiderate of anybody to try to remove him yet from it. Any step in that direction ought, I think, to come from himself. Don't you, Mr. Crook?'

'Possibly, possibly.'

The vicar was opening the gate into his garden, and once within the precincts uncompromising topics in abundance pre-

sented themselves. What with the thistle bed, the botanical bed, the embryo Shakspeare garden,—which was Mr. Crook's most recent development, and which was ultimately to contain a living specimen of every plant mentioned in the great man's writings,—more than an hour was imperceptibly spent before there was any suggestion of entering the house. It was some point arising out of the subjects of their discussion which ultimately called them to the library, and thither at length they went. But they had scarcely got there before they were interrupted.

A maid-servant announced a visitor to the vicar, and he looked at her in astonishment.

'George Rutherford, do you say?'

'Yes, sir. He is at the back door.'

'Take him into the dining-room, Jane.

I will go there. You will excuse me, Miss Langtoft.'

Mr. Crook went to the interview with not a little curiosity. It was useless to speculate, but suggestions would involuntarily arise. The curious thing was that Rutherford was a Presbyterian (by outward conformity, at least,) and had never shown any incipient proclivity to Mr. Crook or his congregation. But there was another point which inevitably occurred to the self-conscious clergyman; the man was a suitor of Maisie Winlaw's.

'Good-morning, sir.'

'Good-morning, Rutherford. Do you wish to speak to me? Take a chair.'

The vicar assumed an aspect of the most disinterested politeness.

'You will be glad to hear that Mr.

Whinstone is likely to recover. So the doctor thinks this morning.'

Mr. Crook said this as his visitor appeared nervous, and uncertain of his opening.

'Yes, sir, but I didna come to speak about him. I want to speak to you about Mr. Paul.'

'Oh, yes, anything I can do for you I will with pleasure.'

Rutherford was not pleased.

'It's no that either; but I mistrust him, Mr. Crook. I canna go round about a tale like some of 'em, so I must tell you straight. I mistrust his doings with Maisie Winlaw.'

'Bless my soul, my good fellow! What can possess you?'

'Just what I say,' replied Rutherford,

doggedly. 'He means badly to that lass.'

Mr. Crook really doubted the man's sanity; he felt for the moment that this late excitement must have touched an ill-balanced brain, and this naturally would be the most obvious turn of the disorder.

'What possible ground can you have for such a supposition?' asked the vicar, sternly.

'Ower good ones, I can assure you. I needna just relate 'em to you now. All I want to ask you, sir, is that you'll gie him warning to keep away.'

'I shall certainly not insult any gentleman upon such insufficient information,' replied Mr. Crook, with some warmth.

'Then let him tak his ain gate,' said the other, rising from his chair. 'There's somebody as can look after her. It's for his

ain good and not mine that I came to you.'

'Stay, Rutherford, please,' the vicar exclaimed, more mildly. 'You cannot object to giving me some slight evidence in support of what you state. It is a serious charge to make.'

The visitor turned round and faced the clergyman angrily.

'What for, then, did the fellow bide away from Burnside yesterday, and gan up to the moor when he knew that Hugh was through to the meeting and the lass alone? That's only yance, but I could tell you of mair. He daurna deny that he went up to her; if he does, I can prove it.'

The vicar was brought to a pause by this assertion.

'I will look into it, Rutherford,' he said,

at length. 'Is that all you wish to tell me?'

'That's all.'

Mr. Crook felt this to be a very unpleasant interruption. It was not that he attached the slightest weight to his visitor's accusation, but that any such topic should be mooted was enough to disquiet his peaceful and sensitive nature. It was utterly impossible for him wholly to conceal his annoyance, so that some measure of dissimulation with Clare was absolutely necessary.

'Really, that Rutherford is a most singular fellow,' Mr. Crook remarked, upon re-entering the study. 'Did you know, Miss Langtoft, that he is a suitor of our friend Maisie's?'

'No, indeed, I did not. Hardly a favoured one, I should fear, from Maisie's predilections.'

'Apparently not. His want of success, I am afraid, unsettles him.'

'That is quite possible, I should think . . . But what a glorious book this is, Mr. Crook!'

The vicar laughed, and rubbed his hands.

'Ha, ha! I knew you would appreciate it. Isn't it unspeakable?'

And so the interruption was glossed over superficially.

There was no lack of entertainment in the vicar's surroundings for anyone of dilettante propensities, so that the time passed pleasantly enough. It is hardly likely that visitor or host was in the mood to enter very deeply into the subjects which they touched, but they succeeded at least in avoiding all appearance of preoccupation. Their animated intercourse

worked upon the feeling of warm mutual regard of which each was always conscious, and just before lunch Mr. Crook had reached the point that he had longed for all the morning.

'I am an impudent old bachelor, Miss Langtoft; that you already know; but you must forgive me. Will you tell me, my dear friend, whether you returned the sketch to Paul?'

'I did not, Mr. Crook,' replied Clare, looking up into his face.

'I do not ask from idle curiosity. I trust you know that.'

'I do know it. I am grieved that Mr. Whinstone should have been led to seek for it.'

Clare's tone gave Mr. Crook the information that he wished for, and it did not serve to reassure him.

Early in the afternoon the vicar walked with Miss Langtoft to the Peel, with the object of himself proceeding to the Hall. He admitted, not without displeasure, that that vagabond had been able to disquiet him. Whatever Paul Whinstone was, at any rate he was a gentleman, and not one breath of scandal had hitherto found utterance against him. The very thought of it infuriated the vicar. He thanked heaven that the source of it was so contemptible, but that he should have dared to originate it was exasperating. And in such a quarter!

Mr. Crook was in an uncomfortable state of perturbation when he reached the Hall. Paul was soon found, and the two walked out together into the open grounds.

'I am an old friend, Paul,' the clergy

man began, almost at once, 'and we understand each other, I think.'

'I hope so,' was the unconcerned reply.

'Then let me be plain with you. Do you know one abominable result of these election proceedings?'

Paul did not look quite so unconcernedly into Mr. Crook's face.

'What do you mean? I know nothing but this accident.'

'The infamous radicals are reflecting upon your attitude to Maisie. It would be wrong of me to hide it from you. It angers me beyond expression, but I must let you know. How on earth could it have arisen?'

'My attitude to Maisie?' returned Paul, slowly. 'How do you mean? Oh, yes, I see. The scoundrels! Who has dared to say anything about me?'

'I heard it in confidence. Don't think, my dear fellow, that I insult you by paying any heed to it, but you know what they are. We must be all the more careful of appearances, that's all. I see through the whole of it. Some of them are jealous of your kindness to the Winlaws. That's at the bottom of it.'

'I expect so.'

'It was a great mistake not to go down to Burnside yesterday.'

'I know it was,' replied Paul, warmly. 'But if you knew how sick I was of that business. It has made me quite ill. I knew we had lost, and I wasn't going to endure the insult of those blackguards.'

'I can sympathise with you,' remarked the vicar. 'But you know what they are. It was unwise, at any rate, to ride over the moor.'

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'I suppose it was,' said Paul, with a tinge of colour which Mr. Crook did not see. 'Certainly, if they are gossiping like this,' he added, more lightly, 'I will take care. It doesn't matter much for me, but for poor Maisie——'

'Exactly, exactly, my dear fellow!' Mr. Crook exclaimed, heartily. 'But remember what I have quoted to you before—

> '"Liars will lee on fell gude men,
> Sae will they do on me;
> I wouldna wish to be the man
> That liars on wouldna lee."

You will excuse me. It is ridiculous to mince matters in a thing of this sort. I knew you would understand it. How is your father going on?'

'Not much difference, but no worse, at any rate.

When the young squire had parted with

the vicar, he did not return at once to the house. Not far from the main gateway there was a footpath leading to a copse, and in this direction Paul walked. When he was hidden in the bushes he left the path, and scrambled down a bank covered with broom and large fern tufts to a brook below. By the edge of the water he flung himself down beneath the overhanging trees, and fixed his eyes upon the leaves and twigs above. Presently he turned, and a sprig of broom tapped him on the face. He plucked it, and held it over him to pull it to pieces. The flowers had gone; but one after another he tore off the pendulous pods, tender and green as yet, but, as Paul once momentarily observed, tinged with a delicate pink where the tiny swelling peas within varied the smooth surface. He opened one with his

nail, idly gazed at it, and threw it away.

'I am a fool,' he muttered, audibly; and nobody was at hand to gainsay it.

Paul lay there long reflecting. No further expression had escaped him, whereby one might judge of the tenor of his thoughts, nor had he moved a single limb. His hands now were idle, tucked beneath his head, and his eyes sometimes closed. At length he rose so far as to rest upon one elbow. Then again a pause.

Whilst in this position, looking across the stream, a movement as of a brown rolling leaf caught his eye. For a time it was disregarded, but then again it moved, and he looked more consciously at it. Then he saw that it was not a leaf, but a stoat. He watched the stealthy creature, moving with such hideous silence. Once

it paused, stood erect on its hind feet, and peered into the long herbage behind it. Then it went on again, and presently disappeared.

Unintentionally Paul's eye still lingered there. In a minute or two he was again aroused. Creeping with the same stealthy movement from beneath a fern the animal again appeared. It crossed the open grass immediately opposite to where Paul was lying, and he saw that it bore a large mouse clenched between its teeth. The sight angered the observer,—the hateful stealth, the helpless prey,—and he leapt up suddenly.

'Bah, you brute!' he cried, and leapt the burn.

But the animal escaped, and retained its booty.

Paul did not compose himself again.

'Yes, I will go,' he said, this time audibly. 'In a time it will wear off.'

And he rambled back to the house.

CHAPTER III.

INDEFINITE.

The evening was still, very still, in this secluded valley. All was in the shade, except the cap of a high hill far in the east, which the last rays of the sun touched and transformed to a crown of purple gold. Not a bird sang or twittered, only a heron sailing to the pine-wood harshly croaked, or a pheasant piped in the gloomy depths of it. The ring of the children's voices in the village, or the resonant bark of a dog, sounded far and clear.

'Well, good-night, Hugh,' could be heard upon the road in a deep vernacular.

'Good-night.'

Then the sound of footsteps on the dry ground.

One of the figures entered the side gateway at the Peel, and walked up the path under the deep shadow of the shrubs. As it approached the corner of the house, another sound was audible, and the footsteps ceased. The figure shrank back into the dark, thick foliage of the bushes, and was no longer visible to anybody on the path. There Hugh stood to listen.

He had never heard Miss Langtoft sing before. The only cultivated singing that he had ever heard was at an amateur concert in the village two years ago, and he had no recollection of having been particularly impressed by it. He perceived this

to be different. The window was open a few inches, so that the strains reached him clearly, and enabled him to distinguish the more delicate modulations of the voice. Although Hugh did not know it, it was one of the German Volkslieder that Clare was singing.

The man was unexpectedly affected by the voice. He stood with his head bowed, and lips just apart, listening intently, whilst his fingers, which were trifling with a smooth, cold leaf, visibly trembled. Of a sudden—it could not be the end, he felt —the music ceased. Eagerly he looked for its recommencement. Some footsteps passed along the kitchen path, and he kept still. Long he stood there, but there was no other sound; so, reluctantly, he emerged, and went forward to the house.

The paper had not been sent out for

him, they said; Miss Langtoft wished to see him. He went through to the hall, and the young lady was informed of his arrival.

Winlaw always experienced the same sensation of pleasure as he stood within this cultivated dwelling, and, if possible, it was intensified to-night by the thrilling strains which he could imagine still lingered in the fragrant atmosphere. Fancying this, he was quite startled by the actual tones when they sounded close beside him.

'Good-evening, Mr. Winlaw.'

Since Hugh's accession of dignity this was how Clare generally addressed him. He followed her to the little room which served as a library.

'I hear from my aunt that you are wanting some books from here.'

'It does not matter, Miss Langtoft, thank you, until Mrs. Monk's return.'

'Oh, you may just as well take them. She seems to expect it. I should think you know the shelves by this time. See if you can find what you want.'

Clare threw herself into an easy-chair near the window and looked out. Hugh stood by the shelves.

'Can you see the titles,' she said, in a few seconds, turning round. 'They had better light the lamps.'

Clare rang the bell, and returned to her chair.

The visitor felt unusually nervous to-night, a feeling not lessened in him by an apparent brusqueness in his hostess. For himself he should have preferred the twi-light. This glare dazzled him. By staring resolutely at the array of books, however,

he gathered courage; and when he spoke, or listened, he only half-turned towards the young lady. Very soon even this was unnecessary.

'What is it you can't find?' asked Clare, presently.

'The first two volumes of Cunningham's "Lives of the Artists."'

'No, of course you can't. I have got them upstairs.'

'I can have them another time,' said Hugh, as Clare went towards the door. 'I shall be sorry if you fetch them for me, Miss Langtoft.'

She silenced him with a word as she swept gracefully past.

'There they are,' was her exclamation when in a few minutes she returned: she held them out towards him and looked

into his face as he took them. 'Do you think that I would keep them a minute when they can be of use to you? What do I do with them, indeed?' she said, with a light laugh. 'I have read them long since, and only look into them sometimes for amusement. You will gather more than amusement from them. Stimulus, I hope, and experience.'

'There is nothing for you to gather from them, Miss Langtoft,' was Hugh's fearless answer. 'If you will forgive my saying it, you are yourself the child of all the best that is in them.'

He was so calm and self-possessed that there was no possibility of her misunderstanding his meaning. Nevertheless, she perceptibly blushed as she bowed her head in acknowledgment. She was still standing near him.

'That is too pretty a compliment, Mr. Winlaw.'

'It is merely the truth,' continued Hugh, with the utmost gravity. 'The highest of our world are only what the artists have made them,—I mean all the artists, whatever the form of their art, whether in word or picture. Don't you think so, Miss Langtoft?'

There was such a simple earnestness in the method of his inquiry that Clare could not be affected enough to regard it personally. She took up the broad suggestion of his statement.

'As regards æsthetic refinements, no doubt you are right; but without material advancement these cannot exist.'

'No, they cannot, but the material advancement is the least part about them. What is the material advancement without

the influence of refinement? It is just the life of our people in general,' he exclaimed, with a suspicion of impatience.

Clare smiled upon him approvingly, as he looked into a book that he was holding.

'No doubt you are right,' she said.

'Isn't it hateful to you, Miss Langtoft?' Hugh asked, looking up at her.

'I don't think I should use quite such a strong word about it. I don't consider it a lofty ideal; but in such considerations I am intensely selfish. As long as it does not personally affect me, I scarcely form an opinion upon it.'

Hugh felt this as a dagger of disappointment. He was just then in that robust phase of development in which enthusiasm, hence propagandism, appears the only and the natural test of sincerity.

'Don't say that, Miss Langtoft,' he re-

plied, fervently. 'I cannot believe it.'

'You have too high an opinion of me, Mr. Winlaw,' was her good-humoured comment: but he shook his head.

'You must be mistaken,' he went on, impetuously. 'The perfection of a beautiful life canna but regard with hatred the vile meanness of a sordid one, cannot but wage war against it. It is impossible to be indifferent to it.'

'But may it not inspire sympathy rather?'

'Not in me, and not in you. Suffering may inspire sympathy, but do they suffer? They rejoice in it. One doesn't feel sympathy with a carrion crow because it is not a skylark.'

Again Clare smiled, but said nothing.

'It is deep, deep in the heart of us. We despise the spiritual; we make it a byword.

I was shocked, Miss Langtoft, to read a letter in the "Life of Scott" the other day, —a letter written with the great man's own hand. *He*,—you will remember, it very likely,—*he* desires a poet to have a more *respectable* calling than that of poetry alone. He would prefer him in his respectable moments to cobble shoes, perhaps, or to hunt after whisky barrels like Burns had to do. I would rather read of Scott picking a pocket than writing that; that I would.'

There was a moment's silence after this, during which Hugh seemed to regather his senses.

'You will forgive me talking so freely to you, my dear friend,' he said, apologetically, 'but I forget myself sometimes.'

'I should be sorry if you did otherwise, Hugh, to——in this house. If you must

go, I will see you out. It is no use going all the way round the side path.'

As Hugh gathered up his books, his hands trembled excessively, and he could hear his own heart beating like a clock. He followed Clare into the hall, his eyes fixed upon her queenly figure in a rapturous homage, but neither spoke. At the door the young lady simply bade him good-night, and she herself returned to the library.

Once again in the twilight, Hugh hurried on his way, as if anxious to escape from the thrilling effect of that place. He felt that it had stirred him more than ever to-night; more than he ought to permit it to do. Now, in this obscure light, what was he, forsooth? In that glittering light he could imagine many things; but now he could find no escape from the dire reality.

Before he had left home, Maisie had told him that it was reported that there was a coldness between Clare and Mr. Paul, and that what he, Hugh, had with so much pleasure depended upon was likely to prove altogether a delusion. It had troubled him at the outset, but now in the obscurity of the pine-wood, for no definite reason, it rejoiced his heart. She was too good for him; she was too good for any man. She appeared rather some sacred spiritual abstraction, around which only the *soul* of a man might dare to hover. In a spirit of worship only could she rightly be approached. Any worldly thought was a profanation, nothing short of blasphemy in the thinker.

Meanwhile, the object of his adoration was sitting in the library in a mood most human. Beyond the form, incontestably divine, there was very little of the deity

about her. Clare felt very nearly miserable. She was without visible occupation, her hands clasped behind her head and her feet extended to their utmost. The silence seemed insupportable, and all the world dreary and without warmth. She followed Hugh on his homeward walk; her soul shuddered at the prospect. How could he sustain that enthusiastic outlook? Then her thoughts reverted to her absent relative, and still she found but little comfort. No doubt at this moment *she* was revelling in the glitter of the theatre and the joys of an exhilarating world, but Clare was not, and it is hard to extract consolation from the pleasures of another. She felt a craving to be with her, an ardent longing to be away from this; but that mysterious cloud descended, and chilled her heart.

Then Clare took up a book, but she could not read. She could only see that terrifying aspect of her aunt, and from that she shrank. Nevertheless, she could not banish it, and presently she gathered strength. This was her only parent, and, as she was obliged to admit, at no time a conventional one. Was she for a single glance, for a single incident not wholly intelligible to her, to sever the bond of flesh and blood, the bond so inextricably tightened by a life-long intercourse? At this moment it seemed preposterous. She was longing for companionship, and yet shrank from what was naturally offered to her. Better to acknowledge herself foolish, and accept the unintelligible.

Clare withdrew early that night, but dreamed too vividly to obtain much refreshment from her sleep. In the morning

she made a resolution, which was confirmed when the post came bringing an affectionate letter from her aunt. This lady stated that she should be still some days in London, and hoped that Clare would survive until her return. Clare felt that she could not, and furthermore that she did not intend to try. The breath of town which the letter brought to her was irresistible, and thither she resolved to go just for one single draught to revive her drooping spirits. At any rate, her aunt was not a criminal, and, whatever the reason of her unusual reticence, it could arise from nothing but what (as the lady herself had asserted) could be disposed of in a hearty laugh.

From Angryhaugh Miss Langtoft telegraphed, to avoid anything in the nature of espionage, and for the remainder of the

day she was being whirled across the country.

After her long imprisonment in the hills, the rush and the sounds of life were exhilarating. Nevertheless, now that she was in action, her thoughts reverted as frequently to what she had left behind as to what lay before, or to what she was at each moment passing through. Instantly those solitary scenes lost the sharp outlines of bald actuality, to which recent practical proceedings had succeeded in reducing them, and were presented anew with the ideal halo which imagination involuntarily wove around them.

The enthusiastic words of the shepherd in the library rang out with renewed clearness to her now, and his walk across the hills presented nothing gloomy to her mind. She liked to picture him stalking man-

fully along that bare ridge against the sky, solitary, but thinking thoughts beyond his sheep. He gave a definite character to the scene, as it were a central impersonation around which her fancy might play with more than customary distinctness. She saw that generous glow upon his features; perhaps, too, something of that ardent homage towards herself which gave it its peculiar tint, and the picture lost none of its attractiveness from such perception.

Late in the evening she reached King's Cross, and visions of all kinds were for a time obliterated. As she rattled westwards in her cab, she began to repent her impulsiveness. She tried to recover the old feeling of unquestioning, unconscious confidence, with which so recently she would have approached her aunt under circum-

stances such as these, but she failed to do it. She could not fling herself into the house with unrestrained, almost childish laughter; of that she was quite aware. And how would she be received?

It was in Westbourne Terrace that the cabman stopped. Clare alighted and dismissed him, then ran up to the door and rang.

'You got my telegram,' she said, entering.

'Yes, miss.'

'Is my aunt at home?'

The maid did not immediately answer.

'Not? When did she go out?'

'The mistress is not here, miss.'

Clare thought her remarkably obtuse.

'Didn't she say when she would be back?'

'She hasn't been here at all, miss.'

'Not at all! What do you mean? She was here yesterday.'

'No, miss.'

'Is Mrs. Ransom in? Ask her to come to me, please.'

Clare took her aunt's letter from her pocket, which she had received that morning. It was unmistakably written on a sheet of their Westbourne Terrace stationery, but thrusting it back again she admitted that that meant nothing She herself had plenty of it at the Peel.

The housekeeper could enlighten her no further. Since they left together to go to Northumberland, Mrs. Monk had not been there. Clare laughed and the housekeeper laughed.

'It is like her,' said the former, lightly. 'I took it for granted that she would call

here, but she must have gone directly through to Paris.'

To Mrs Monk's household such a freak presented nothing remarkable; but Clare was uncomfortably conscious of the fact that for the first time in her life her aunt had deceived her.

The following morning she took train again for the north.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARBITRAMENT.

Paul Whinstone's immediate friends were amazed at that gentleman's sudden resolution to return for a time to his neglected studies. Mr. Kidland did not hesitate to say that he did think his friend had done with all that nonsense, and that if he thought that kind of thing would promote his interests in a certain quarter he was making a deuced mistake.

There was nothing like being constantly *en évidence* for a pursuit of that sort, Alan

averred, and he clearly foresaw that if Paul once allowed himself to drop quietly from the surface for a week or two he was as good as a doomed man. Private study, if he liked,—newspaper and atlas to his mind contained the whole of the essentials for the studies of any gentleman,—anything that could be carried on upon the spot, and blended with the educational amusements of rural life so fatal to fair victims; but to put yourself out of the way,—to admit, too, that you had not yet left school, —well, what on the face of it did it look like?

None of their arguments, however, touched Paul. Kidland and Selby might twit him as they liked; Margaret might implore: he meant to go, and he went.

'There's one consolation, Miss Whinstone,' said Alan, affectionately, to the dis-

consolate sister: 'he'll soon be back; and,' he added, confidentially, 'there's somebody left, you know.'

Margaret responded rather coldly to the insinuation, so Kidland thought. She must indeed be very fond of Paul.

For a few days the house was simply intolerable to Miss Whinstone. The presence of serious illness alone is sufficient to cast a dispiriting atmosphere over a dwelling, although one may not be very acutely affected by a feeling of sympathy for the patient. The unnatural quietness which prevails, the disorganization of the familiar routine which is to some extent inevitable, if only from the necessity of a decent self-restraint imposed upon the sound members of the household, all tends to the diffusion of discomfort. When the ills have to be encountered absolutely

single-handed, the effect of them is by no means mitigated. Margaret was exceedingly miserable. It was only at dinner that she had even her mother's society, but with this she would readily have dispensed. Since the first cold kiss upon the threshold, they had not been drawn one single hair's-breadth the nearer, and both were fully conscious of the fact. As a mere matter of duty, the mother at least had made sundry efforts, but these she had long since abandoned. She had been obliged to recognise that the bond was effectually severed, never to be re-connected by human means.

Margaret spent much of her enforced solitude in the privacy of the billiard-room, practising constantly some of Mr. Kidland's most complex strokes. In the occupation her whole mind was not

abandoned to the delicate matter in hand. She naturally thought of the players, of incidents connected with them, and of the host of associated ideas which followed in their wake. Mrs. Kidland—Lady Selby were not infrequently amongst them; or, as they were now more usually presented, Lady Selby—Mrs. Kidland. It seemed a pity that Mr. Selby was not more devoted to the game; but, after all, he was more intellectual. It was not possible to be everything.

On the third day after Paul's departure, in the afternoon, Margaret was thus employed. She had just made a ravishing stroke, and was flourishing her cue in triumphant ecstasy, when there was a knock at the door.

'Come in!' she shouted, instantly composing herself.

'Mr. Walter Selby wishes to see you, miss.'

There was no marked friendship between the young lady and her dependents.

'Bring him up here,' was the curt rejoinder, and Margaret's heart took an unusual bound.

In a few minutes Mr. Selby appeared, and immediately Miss Whinstone was politely radiant.

'How do you do, Mr. Selby? It is kind of you to call. You will excuse my asking you to come up here—oh, I thought so. It is more out of the way. Have you really brought it?'

The visitor nodded complacently, and laid his hand upon his breast-pocket.

'Yes, I am terribly lonely. You don't know what a godsend you are. I have

not seen anybody to speak to the whole day.'

'Really! That is too bad,' replied Selby, with a tenderly-compassionate intonation.

'I get quite melancholy.'

'I should think so. It is awfully bad with illness about. A sight of that nurse is enough to give one the blues.'

'Oh, have you seen her?' cried Margaret, laughing. 'Isn't she a sight? I have only set eyes on her once, and I am sure I don't want to again. Where did you see her?'

'She was going into a room as I came up. She looked at me as if she wanted to bewitch me.'

'The rude thing! Just like them. Mamma likes her, though, and says that she is very clever.'

'That's very likely,' said Selby. 'She looks it.'

Then he took up a cue leaning against the table, and made an idle stroke with the balls.

'You have been using this, Miss Whinstone?'

'How do you know?'

'You clasp it too tightly. It is warm yet.'

'I am sure to do something wrong.'

'No, don't say that!' exclaimed Selby, glancing upwards. 'I was only joking. Let me see how you do it.'

'Afterwards. Let us read your paper first. I am dying to hear it. Do, please!'

She rippled her snow-white forehead, and threw a beseeching glance from between her black eyelashes right into Selby's face. He was ravished by the sight,

and laid his hand softly upon her shoulder.

'Do you really, Margaret?'

'I do, really,' she replied, colouring a little, and turning her head away.

They sat down on a couch side by side, and Mr. Selby produced his manuscript. He was happy. This young gentleman was more nervous, less demonstrative than Mr. Kidland, but he, too, had fancied himself in love with Margaret from his first sight of her. Upon him, however, the primary effect was different. It placed a distance between them; had caused him to be shy and reticent towards her—the result of which had been that Margaret imagined him indifferent to her, and she began by heartily disliking him in consequence. Her attitude had only served to make him still more distant. When, however, certain circumstances had brought

him more forcibly to Miss Whinstone's attention, she perceived her error; and, despite his unmanageable coldness, she determined to be persistently gracious. This was the only treatment that Selby had required. Instantly he thawed, and, for the last week or two, had made no secret of his attitude.

The genuineness of Margaret's feeling was, no doubt, sufficiently attested by her present behaviour. Only the most ardent affection, surely, could effectually sustain any appearance of interest in such a dreary disquisition. Mr. Selby dealt at length with the statistics of the border moorlands —acreage, return per acre, number of sheep per acre, rainfall, &c. This being sufficiently established, he entered into contrasting statistics from a similar area in the county of Gloucester: then he drew

up a balance-sheet. The deficit per acre being obvious, he launched into a technical dissertation upon drain-pipes, (supplied, by the way, by his agent,) and the cost per acre of laying them down. The 'fall,' the 'out-put,' and similar technical expressions were freely interspersed, and they undoubtedly imparted a real smack of learning to his efforts. It was at this point that his paper stopped. These were, at any rate, the 'recitals,' the irresistible premises convincingly presented; the 'testatum,' as lawyers would call it—the deduction, as logicians—was to follow very soon.

'Oh, is that all?' said Margaret, obviously disappointed. 'I was getting so interested.'

'That is as far as I have gone. The rest is quite clear in my own mind, and only

wants writing down. Do you think it will do? It reads rather well, doesn't it?'

'Exceedingly well, Mr. Selby. It is most learned, I am sure. However you can remember it all, I don't know. What a splendid work you will do if you can convince people of their ignorance.'

'And, you see, it will put money into their pockets as well——'

'Ha, of course! With most people, I am afraid, that will be the best part about it; but to me it's the glory of the thing. To think that for centuries—why, since the world began, I suppose—all this district has been barren, nothing but heather and bog, and that it should be left for you to rescue it. How proud you ought to be!'

As Margaret was proceeding so ecstatic-

ally, she felt a hand placed tenderly upon her own.

'Are *you* proud of me, Margaret?' Mr. Selby asked.

'Of course I am,' she continued, vivaciously. 'Everybody must be, but especially those who—those who——'

'Those who what? Do finish it. What were you going to say?'

Margaret blushed and looked down.

'Those who have any interest in the border.'

'That is not it, my dearest Margaret. Confess that it is not. Say "those who love you." Do!'

'How can I, Mr. Selby?'

He still held her hand between both of his.

'Why? Isn't it so? Don't you love me, darling? Can I have no hope? . . .

I will have,' he continued, boldly taking her into his arms, without encountering any resistance. 'Look up, dearest.'

She turned her face towards him, and he placed his own upon it. What followed was said in whispers.

When, some time afterwards, they came out of the billiard-room, in the corridor, to their surprise, but a few paces before them, appeared the nurse.

'Mrs. Whinstone wishes to see you, please, miss,' she said, and promptly retreated.

Margaret had started back nervously at the sight of her. There seemed no reason for it, for the woman looked anything but alarming. Her face was certainly unnaturally pale; but for that her occupation appeared sufficiently to account; and her

hair, although parted in the middle, was allowed to droop from beneath her cap in two loops low down over her forehead. The effect was rather weird, but the subdued look of patience and humility modified it.

'Why should mamma send her? I believe she had been listening.'

'No, no, dearest, she would not do that,' said Selby, in a low tone. 'I hope it doesn't matter much if she had,' he added; 'does it?'

'No, I suppose not.'

Then they went down the stairs, talking gaily.

Mr. Selby's horse was brought for him, and, when Margaret had waived him an affectionate farewell, she ran up to her mother's room.

Before the visitor had ridden far down the drive, as undemonstratively ecstatic as unqualified success could make him, who should he perceive advancing at a canter towards him but his friend Mr. Alan Kidland. Now this was the only man of whom Walter had stood in fear; before him his chances had appeared at zero. In the face of what had happened, he naturally approached him now with a feeling of peculiar triumph, some reflection of which must have been apparent in his usually inexpressive features.

'You look sprightly, old man,' observed Kidland, as they drew rein beside each other. 'Finished the paper?'

'Not quite. Turn round, and let's have a canter on the moor. He's going on all right; you needn't bother to go up.'

'Thanks, awfully.' And Alan regarded

his friend with a peculiar twinkle. 'I'm primed, Watty; honour bright.'

'How do you mean?'

'Haven't you noticed? We're old friends. I needn't keep it any longer. I'm going to propose to the girl.'

Then followed an interchange of significant glances.

'The deuce you are!' said Mr. Selby, with the handle of his riding-whip to his lips.

Mr. Kidland laughed consumedly. He had for some time suspected his friend's attitude, but he knew how long he would require to get up steam for such an enterprise. It was really awfully funny. Walter could draw a long face when he liked, and it was evident that there was no poor attempt at it now.

'It's as good as settled, of course,' Alan

went on, confidentially. 'She knows all about it, and that kind of thing. But she gave me a hint of the coast being clear when Paul was out of the way. You didn't see her about, did you?'

'Yes, I did.'

Alan was again convulsed with laughter.

'Poor old man! Never mind; she's too lively for you, Wat; honour bright. It 'ud never do, really.'

'But she seems to think differently,' said Selby, gravely,—an attitude which Alan misunderstood.

'Don't take it rough, old man. We're old friends, Watty. I'm sure, if you were me, you know, and I you, it shouldn't make a bit of difference. It shouldn't, upon my honour. You're not crusty, eh?'

'No, certainly not. But you're under

a deuced mistake, Alan. It is not a quarter-of-an-hour ago since she accepted *me*. Arms round, kiss, and all the rest of it. I've got the measure of her finger.'

'The devil!' said Kidland, blankly. 'But you're joking, Walter.'

'Here's my hand on it, my dear fellow. I have been with her nearly an hour in the billiard-room.'

Alan slowly turned his horse's head, and the two walked down the rest of the drive together.

'But she's as good as accepted me,' exclaimed Kidland, fiercely.

'No, no, she wouldn't do that, old chap. You exaggerate, you know. She spoke of you as a great friend,—very fond of,—sisterly, and all that kind of thing,—but she meant nothing else.'

Suddenly Kidland drew up and faced his friend.

'Look here, Walter, I can't give up the girl like this. I can't be mistaken, I tell you. I've had my arms round, kissed, and all the rest of it, for a matter of that,' —Selby started;—'but I'll tell you what. I'll toss you for her. Now, come, that's fair. Agreed?'

Selby paused.

'Have you really done what—what you said to her?'

'I have, honour bright.'

'Toss, then.'

Alan brought out half-a-crown.

'Head for you; tail for me: that do?'

Selby nodded.

Mr. Kidland's gloves came together

with a pat, and he raised one hand. It was head.

'Shake hands, old man,' he exclaimed, frankly. 'I wish you joy. That ends my fourth.'

And they rode onwards the best of friends.

CHAPTER V.

THE NURSE'S WAGES.

Mr. Whinstone lay in the darkened room, his breathing just audible in the state of solemn hush to which the chamber was consigned, and an occasional soft movement from the dressing-room adjoining alone betraying the proximity of the nurse. The peculiar scent of medicaments pervaded the atmosphere, imparting to it a singular individuality especially appropriate to the weird scene which it accompanied. It suggested mystic rites for the discomfiture

of the evil one. Sitting in the impressive obscurity of the chamber, and hearing those muffled footsteps through the wall, it could hardly have excited wonder if, upon that inner doorway being opened, some grizzled alchemist,—some Rappacini or Roger Chillingworth, perhaps,—had issued thence, with smoking crucible and noiseless tread, in place of the present-day nurse who actually appeared.

It was a week later, and afternoon. Through the screened window came the sound of a rustling wind, and of rooks hard by, but nothing more. The patient lay awake, thinking, and he heard them. As that inner doorway quietly opened, and the strong light was thrown into his room, Mr. Whinstone turned towards it, grateful for any change. In the light the nurse stood, quite still for a minute, her

face distinct, looking towards the bed. She then closed the door, leaving it just ajar, and advanced to the side of the sick man.

'I am going to-day,' she said.

'Great G——, who are you?' was his startled reply, trying ineffectually to raise himself.

'Be silent. If you excite yourself I shall not speak to you. You know who I am. You are out of danger, and to-day I go.'

'Are you the nurse? Have you been with me all the time?'

'I have.'

'Are you a woman, an angel, or a devil?' he asked, with a singular tremulousness of utterance.

'Something of all three; but with little of the second and a preponderance of the last.'

'What has brought you here? How did you know about it? I forgot,' he said, checking himself. 'Are you Mrs. Monk, the woman that I was riding home to see? For God's sake tell me that.'

'I am not,' she answered.

Then followed a short pause.

'Are you now a professional nurse?' was his next question, given more wearily.

'No, I am not, but I can be on occasion.'

'So it seems. How did you deceive them?'

'It was easy.'

'Then why did you undertake it You cannot be—no, no! Tell me why.'

'No, I am not fond of you. It was from no feeling of that sort. I cannot tell you why; at least, you would not

understand it. It took my fancy, that was all. It was thought that you would die, and the opportunity was irresistible.'

'If you had known then that I should recover, you would not have come?'

'Not so surely. I might have done so, but I cannot say. I came because I thought you were on the point of death.'

'Singular creature, as you always were. You speak quite truly, I cannot understand you. Do you hate me, and do you wish to see me die? Is that it?'

'Oh, dear, no,' replied the woman, with singular levity. 'I have sometimes hated you, but your death as an actual object I have never desired; never.'

'Will you tell me this—are you really poor, as you have always pretended to be?'

'Did you not yourself bring me to

poverty? When I was thrust out, or say relieved, from my home and from my world, did I take so much as a farthing, as a single rag, along with me?'

'I understood not,' he muttered. 'But I cannot believe it. You could not live in poverty. Luxury is the breath of life to you. Time could not alter it. You find some wild pleasure in playing upon me; but that you have money I am perfectly assured. You have obtained it since, but you are not poor. The assurance gives me some satisfaction, although it is not from me you have it. Will you take from me now?'

'I will not. I shall receive my wages from Mrs. Whinstone,'—the man could almost hear the curling of her lip as she uttered these words,—'and I shall take them, I must take them; but I shall give

them to a hospital,'—there was laughter in her voice,—'or to some proper and deserving object of the kind.'

'Curious being,' muttered the patient. 'Have you anything else to say to me, for I feel weary?'

'No, I have done. I too am weary. This employment is not a pleasant one. I long for air.'

'Who succeeds you?'

'A genuine nurse.'

'Will you shake hands with me?' he asked, languidly, trying to free one arm from the clothes.

'Of course I will,' was her indifferent reply. 'Pray don't think I have any grudge against you.'

She shook hands with him as politely as she would have done with any casual acquaintance.

'I don't think so, but I cannot understand it,'—he tried to retain her hand for a few seconds.

'Bah!' she exclaimed, drawing it quickly away. 'Good-bye. No, don't thank me. I have not done it out of kindness.'

Mr. Whinstone muttered something, but the nurse had gone.

For a few minutes she was with Mrs. Whinstone in her room. She was demurely dressed for travelling, and appeared in all her accustomed meekness and reserve. The lady was profuse in her thanks, pressed liberal remuneration upon her, and only regretted the urgent call which necessitated her transferring elsewhere her valuable services. Moreover, she should not fail to express to her friend Mrs. Monk the deep sense of gratitude which she must always feel for her timely

recommendation Brief thanks were given, and an assurance that her successor would far excel her.

Paul's voice was heard upon the stairs; he had just returned. As the nurse descended, he met her, and, after staring at her in amazement, said, audibly,

'Mrs. Monk.'

The nurse turned towards him, as with mute, polite inquiry.

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' exclaimed Paul, with a laugh, and went on up the stairs.

Soon after, Mr. Whinstone sent for his wife.

'Eleanor, how did you obtain that nurse?'

'Mrs. Monk kindly recommended her. You were satisfied with her?'

'Certainly, in every respect. I won-

dered where she came from. Thank you.'

As Mrs. Whinstone left the room the patient thought,

'Then certainly she lied to me.'

It was about a quarter-past two in the morning when the late nurse at Feldom Hall arrived at King's Cross station. No doubt her calling had made her familiar with all times and places, so that there was nothing surprising in her business-like movements now. None of the humility which had been so marked a feature of her professional behaviour was apparent here. She leaped on to the platform with an elastic step, and looked about her with an aspect of singular exhilaration. The journey, so far from having wearied her, seemed rather to have acted as a tonic to her system.

No, she had no luggage,—apparently none at all; not even an umbrella.

Crossing the platform, she hailed a hansom, and at once got in.

'Charing Cross,' she said through the lid; and away they went.

It was a fine night, but a brisk wind was blowing. The streets were at length at rest, only a grim figure here and there slouching along under shadow of the buildings, or disappearing into some alley at the rattle of their wheels. They made a great noise in the universal stillness: now through a dark and narrow street now through a broad one; now skirting a square, the trees in the centre just visible in the lamplight; now a hoarding covered with advertisements. The great black gap with its railed front and row of lamp-posts, which represented the Museum, was

passed; New Oxford Street crossed; St. Giles' entered.

Opposite St. Martin's Church the cab was stopped, and the nurse alighted. The man was paid, and, judging from his placidity, with liberality. She heard his wheels departing, and then, for the moment, she was in the great square alone. She crossed over to the southern corner, where she passed a policeman—on to Cockspur Street, then turned off by the Board of Works office into the Mall. Here she met the wind, as it came whistling through the trees, and she saw that apparently endless row of lamps before her fading away in the distance. She passed quickly along the centre of the walk, just glancing now and then at the seats by the pathway, and perceiving perhaps some obscure figure huddled up there for repose,

but she did not turn aside. As she approached the end of the Mall, and saw the great black palace loom before her, she slackened her pace. On the pavement at the corner she stopped.

Just outside St. James' Park there, in an angle of the railings drawn back from the footway, is the last public seat. At night-time, owing to the position of the railings, and to the dark evergreen shrubs behind, the seat is completely shaded from the rays of the adjacent lamps. Into this corner, nevertheless, the nurse peered, and was able to perceive a form in silhouette, blacker than the dark surroundings, of indistinct outline, but presumably of human shape. She stepped noiselessly towards it, and, seeing that no movement followed, she sat down by its side. Seen more closely, the object appeared merely

a shapeless bundle, if owning life apparently asleep.

For some minutes the woman sat there motionless, looking first across at the palatial building before her the only light in which appeared in one of the small windows of the topmost story; then at the figure by her side. The wind still whistled in the trees behind her, but all else was still. Presently she heard a cab in the distance; it came nearer and nearer; she saw its lamps; the lights flashed upon her as it rattled past in the roadway; then the sound died away in the other direction.

In the silence which succeeded this, the nurse heard a rustle beside her, followed by a childish whisper, 'Mother!' She herself did not stir. The whisper was repeated, and the whole figure seemed to move.

'Mother, there's somebody there,' came in the same subdued, childish accents.

The nurse then became aware that a woman was staring into her face, and immediately she drew nearer to her.

'Have you nowhere to sleep?' she asked.

'I have not,' replied the other.

The nurse was surprised by her accent.

'You are not accustomed to this?'

'No, I am not. Evidently you are not. But perhaps you are a Sister of Mercy.'

'Well, no. I am afraid I am not. Once I sat here all night as you are doing, penniless and without a home, but it is several years ago. I call it my seat still. Will you tell me why you are here?'

'No, I cannot.'

'Very good. Then can you name a

wish that you would like to have fulfilled?'

The woman laughed, a painful laugh to hear,—more than merely hollow and joyless, far more.

'That my child and I were buried under the elm-trees in Saintbury churchyard.'

'Where is that?'

'On the side of the green hills in Gloucestershire——'

'Yes, yes, I know the name,—I have been there,' interposed the nurse. 'It faces the setting sun in the long days, with a wide vale of gold before it. Behind it is a steep brow of gorse-covered pasture with a shattered ash-tree or two at the top. Lambs frisk up to the walls, and the whistling swifts wheel around the steeple far into the twilight. Yes, it is a restful

spot; but the wish is impracticable. Name another; a presently remedial one, rather.'

The poor woman peered at this singular companion through the obscurity, but beyond an apparent sombre plainness of attire she discerned little. She did not at once answer.

'You are married apparently?'

Still no answer.

'You are not, then? So much the better. Your hope should be vastly stronger. You are far from the lowest depths, if you are free from that.'

'It is useless to name it,' began the woman.

'Why, how much?' asked the nurse, with cynical alacrity.

'Five pounds.'

From her tone of voice the sum appeared

evidently as hopeless to the suppliant as five hundred would have done. It was exactly the amount which Mrs. Whinstone had presented to the nurse for her week's work.

'Would that sum really restore you to a permanent footing?'

'It would.

'Then here it is.'

The note was placed in her hand, but so convinced was the poor woman that the whole thing was a mere mental delusion arising from her reduced physical condition that she could articulate no reply. The nurse preferred it so.

'Are you hungry?' she went on, rapidly. 'No food for three days or so, isn't it?'

The woman muttered an affirmative.

'Do you know any place where we could get in at this time?'

'There is a place down the King's Road.'

'You can walk? Then come, I am hungry myself.'

'But it is only a——'

'Bah! So much the better.'

Whereupon they set off.

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The strange woman had begun to realize the situation more definitely before they separated, and had confided to the nurse something of her history, in which the latter obviously took a marked interest. So much so that, upon leaving, she gave a scrap of paper to the woman bearing a name and an address, and bade her communicate her movements to that quarter for the next few weeks. It was daylight when they parted, and the nurse drove to an hotel in Paddington.

At about eight o'clock that morning Mrs. Monk arrived at her house in Westbourne Terrace, having, as she stated, been travelling through the night. She learned of Clare's visit there a few days ago, and displayed open merriment at the news. At ten o'clock she took train for the north.

CHAPTER VI.

CROSS-ROADS.

'Mr. Kidland said you would soon be back, Paul,' remarked Margaret, as the two sat together at the breakfast-table. 'Have you had enough of it?'

'Oh, no, I've only run down for a bit of change,' replied Paul, busy with his plate. 'I never meant to stay up there altogether, you know.'

'I am so glad. Do stay now for the grouse, won't you? Oh, you don't know what a week I've had.'

The young man laughed.

'I told you it was rather dull when nobody was down here. You know the truth of it now.'

'Oh, I don't know that I do,' said Margaret, rather piqued. 'There's always something, you know.'

'How is Alan getting on?' returned Paul, looking at his sister slyly.

'I don't know. I've not seen him since you left here.'

'Indeed! What's the something then, old girl?'

'Why should you ask like that about Mr. Kidland?' said his sister, looking back at him.

'I thought you were rather fond of him, that is all.'

'As a friend of yours, of course I am; but nothing else.'

'I see.'

'How blind you men are!' she exclaimed, with a merry laugh; then added, in an undertone, 'It's Walter Selby, Paul.'

Paul looked up with unaffected amazement.

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Oh, if you are cross, I shan't tell you anything more,' said Margaret, pettishly; but her brother laughed as she went on. 'You never can see such things. It's not likely that we should make sillies of ourselves just to amuse you. Still waters run deep, you know. I'm engaged to him now.'

'To Walter Selby!'

'Yes; you speak as if you were ashamed of him. Is he not good enough, pray?'

'By all means; but all I can say is,

you have behaved deuced shabbily to Kidland.'

They had a little quarrel immediately, which resulted in Margaret's leaving the table abruptly in tears. Paul was angry about it, and that morning he rode over to see his friend Alan. The latter did not hesitate to consider that he had been badly used, but (omitting mention of the precise method of arriving at his decision) expressed his determination manfully to accept his fate.

'I just wet my handkerchief once over it, you know, and then put it away. I shan't quarrel with Walter about it. If you take my advice, old man, you'll keep clear of the lot of them. A pack of hounds is worth all the women that ever muddled a man's intellect.'

Paul spent the rest of the day at Kid-

land; and in the twilight set off for his homeward ride across the hills. It was a thick, dull evening, and prematurely dusky. Paul felt his spirits to be subdued to the surroundings. Now that he was alone and a prey to his own reflections, all that philosophical indifference which Alan's sprightly conversation had appeared able to impart to him was extinguished, and his course appeared to be as indefinite as ever. The object of his week's absence he had clearly not attained. The gloom of Feldom Hall rose like a night cloud before him; and the exasperation of the Peel. Only one ray of light, in fact, appeared throughout the whole of that desolate moorland country, and that he felt impelled to shun. What a ridiculous world it was! We only lived to make ourselves gratuitously wretched.

In such mood he reached the parting of the roads. To the right lay darkness and depression; to the left a twinkling light, and at least a momentary exhilaration. For human flesh there was only one decision, and the horse cantered readily away to the left.

There was a light in the window, but no sound about the place. Maisie's heart he could not hear, although to herself it sounded fully as loud as the heavy thud of the horse's hoofs upon the turf. No dog, thought Paul; then he is not here. He paused; actually turned his horse's head; but eventually he dismounted. Just for a moment.

'Not here again?'

'No, sir; he goes every night to fetch the paper from the Peel.'

Paul knew he did. Nevertheless, he

went in, without a word from either. It was Paul himself that closed the door. They both went in to the light, looked into each other's face for a whole minute silently, until Maisie's eyes fell. Both fully understood the look. Then the young man broke the silence, as he went forward to touch her.

'Whatever befalls me, Maisie, I can hide it no longer—I love you. Do not drive me out! Hear me first. I went away to flee from it, but escape was impossible. Your face has haunted me day and night. My sweet girl, you are beautiful.'

He caressed her as he spoke, but at his first touch the girl burst into tears. Paul took her in his arms, and laid his lips to her ear. This at any rate he had not expected.

Maisie's lonely hours of reflection and

spiritual wrestling were unknown to him. It never for a moment occurred to him that she had really thought much about his attitude towards her. Even her behaviour now did not give him much light; he simply did not understand it. How should he see through these tears the crushing consciousness of defeat in a crisis long expected—long prepared for? To do him justice, he had not himself very distinctly foreseen the crisis. It was in no way the effect of a deliberate design on his part, however natural the result to disinterested onlookers. With Maisie it was otherwise. She had foreseen it all; calculated bitterly every shadow of its aspect. Though bred in absolute seclusion she was no child, in no way ignorant of the doings of the world. She could not plead surprise; she had surveyed the prospect well,

she knew its boundaries. Notwithstanding all, strength and resolution had at the critical moment failed her. Only she herself knew how completely, for no word had escaped her lips.

Paul's honeyed words were poured into her ear. Now, he too was oblivious of all, defiant of all. His world was here. Presently he felt her move, and firmly she released herself. She withdrew to the extremity of the room and wiped her eyes.

'Do not stay here, Mr. Whinstone. You must not stay here.'

'Maisie, do not tell me that. I cannot go. I will not go.'

Then there was silence, only the girl's uncertain breathing being audible. He advanced towards her.

'Do not fear me, darling. Do you

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Then there was silence, only the girl's uncertain breathing being audible. He advanced towards her.

'Do not fear me, darling. Do you

think that I could harm you? You don't know how I love you. You are lonely and unhappy here. You do not like this life; you are not made for it. I will make you happy. I care not what they say, I will marry you, indeed I will. Look at me, Maisie. You are not angry with me. You do not hate me, do you? Not now, although you did once.'

'I will not marry you. I should be unhappy in your life. I am not made for that.'

'Yes, dearest, you are. Swear that you do not love me at all, and I will go, and, if you wish, never see you again. For nothing else will I go.'

'It is cruel to tempt me so,' she said, vehemently. 'You know that it cannot be. You know that I should wrong you if I married you.'

'Wrong me! You shall live as you like, Maisie, and where you like. We would go away from here. Oh, come with me! I hate the place. I will live anywhere with you, and I cannot live without you.'

He had taken her hand again, and she allowed him to retain it. As he touched her hair she turned her eyes towards him, and looked him earnestly in the face. He fearlessly received the gaze, stroking her hair the while.

'What lovely hair you have!'

'I cannot go from here—not yet.'

He drew her towards him with a smile, and promised everything.

When Paul reached home that night, his sister considered him to be in a vastly improved temper. It was he himself that sought to make up their difference.

'It's no good quarrelling, Meg. If you've done this you've done it, and I must congratulate you. Walter will be a baronet in a few weeks very likely, but I don't mind owning to you that I hoped it was Kidland. Because he is my oldest friend, I suppose. Walter's a very good fellow, of course. Do you mean to say anything about it?'

'Yes. Walter will, when father is well enough.'

'But why shouldn't you tell mother confidentially? She would think it nice of you, you know, and she'll be delighted, I can tell you. Walter's quite a pet of hers.'

'Well, I'll see.'

Hugh Winlaw returned to Braidstruther in something more than his accustomed

spirits. Maisie, who had been alone for about an hour before he came, was perfectly composed, and responded with alacrity to her brother's jubilant expression.

She had deliberately taken her draught of the elixir which the fates had proffered to her lip, and she still pressed the goblet with fervour to her heart. Life seemed to be transformed to her, and she looked forth upon it with a singular elation. The glow was none the less excessive because of the unrestful, impetuous breeze which fanned it from the conscientious background. The initial concession to her womanhood had led to a reaction, an unbounded enthusiasm which carried all before it. The mood was opportune for the reception of her brother.

Hugh entered, and closed the doors rather formally behind him. Advancing

'Well, no, not exactly her,' replied Hugh, with a blush. 'It's her aunt, though, so it's all the same. She bade me write it, like she has done other things, ye ken, and now she has got 'em to print it here. She has altered it a little—knocked it into shape, she calls it—but not much, not much.'

Hugh continued to pace to and fro, biting his lip mercilessly.

'How kind of her!' remarked Maisie.

'Kind of her! Bless your life, that's nothing to what's to come! But let's leave her a wee. Just below the wood I met Mr. Paul,'—he was at the extremity of the room, with his back towards her, so that Maisie's startling alteration of expression escaped him—'and what do you think?' The poor girl's knees scarce sustained her. 'His father wants to send me

fifty pounds for what he says I have done for him! Did you ever hear the like? But I canna take it, can I?'

Maisie's heart beat once more as he stopped before her.

'Fifty pounds! It is a lot of money.'

'It is a lot of money—not that it's much to him, though; but I didn't do it for money. Do you think I ought to take it?'

The mere fact of Hugh's propounding such a question for consideration showed the state of his mind about it. Obviously, he owned a leaning towards the more degenerate solution.

'Mr. Paul talked a great deal about it—only a present, you know, and all that kind of thing. And it *would* be useful, my lass, as you'll see presently. But dinna consider that. What do you think

o' the thing as it stands? Just tell me your opinion about it either way.'

'Certainly, I think you should take it, Hugh. They canna think that you did it for money, for they know what you are.'

'So it seems to me, Maisie. I could see that from the way Mr. Paul put it. It eased me a bit. Ou ay, I'll have to take it, daur say. It'll be ower useful, lass—ower useful,' he said, rubbing his hands vigorously.

Maisie watched him with an expression of amusement as he took another turn along the floor.

'I'll have to be through to Newcastle,' was his next exclamation as he stopped before her.

'When? To-morrow?'

Hugh laughed, and shook his head.

'But I canna bring my mind to it. It's

just the murkiest corner in a' the universe. I mind you saying only the last time, Maisie, that you 'ld die if you had to live there.'

'I live there!' cried she, with unexpected alacrity. 'Are you going to live there, Hughie?'

'That's a' the meaning of it, my lass,' he replied, smiling. 'Mrs. Monk says that they'll gie me some small place in the newspaper-office if I'll gan and learn the business.'

'Oh, Hughie, but you must go, of course. It'll be the making of you, man! What bit o' nonsense would you put in the way of it? Oh, it's grand! That it should come to this!'

'Bide a wee, my lass,' said Hugh, the suppressed excitement visible at every point about him. 'I'll no think of it at

all unless you will make an agreement. Will you now?'

'Let me know what it is first.'

'Well, just this: that you'll stay with somebody here for the first twelve months.'

'With who?' asked she, with a curious, startled expression.

'Oh, I dinna ken. I have no thought of that. Who would you think?'

Maisie shook her head.

'There are plenty,' he said. 'You canna gan alang with me at first, for I couldna bear to see you there. I'll have to get some cheap lodgings, and the varry thought of you howking away there a' the day would cripple me. When we ken how things are going we could get a little house, and then we 'ld do well enough.'

'Yes, perhaps it is best,' remarked his sister.

This agreement come to, Hugh sat down and they talked far into the small hours of all that was to come to them.

Mrs. Monk had reached the Peel but a short time before Hugh's arrival there, and she had seized upon him as a convenient introduction to her conversation with her niece. The elder lady was far too self-possessed to allow any tinge of restraint to be apparent in her, despite her knowledge of Clare's visit to Westbourne Terrace. She herself indeed was wholly free from any such feeling, but she instantly perceived that her niece was not. Poor Clare! Yet, if she was fond of anybody, she certainly was fond of her. But she frequently gathered some amusement from what she considered Clare's positive habit of mind. She could picture so well

what was the state of her feelings now, for example.

'Has Hugh been yet?' she said, as she kissed Clare in the usual jaunty fashion. 'You naughty girl, how solemn you look! And you've been to town too!'

Here the lady gave way to a peal of triumphant laughter.

'Oh, what fun! I would give five, ten, or twenty pounds to a charity if I could have seen your face that night, old girl. Show us how it looked, *ma chérie!* Do!'

Clare laughed in spite of herself.

'Was it lonely, then, poor little thing? But I thought it would stay in these romantic hills for six months and not weary? Never mind, I have much to tell you. When will Hugh come?'

'Very soon, I should think.'

'Please ask them to keep him. I have good news for him, therefore for you, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Certainly.'

'Read that, my dear, whilst I——'

Therewith, the newspaper containing Winlaw's article was flung at Clare's head, and Mrs. Monk withdrew. When she came down again, Hugh was awaiting her.

'Have you any objection to offer, mademoiselle?' asked the aunt, later, with reference to this topic, as they sat at the dinner-table.

'I suppose not; but you know I dislike journalists.'

'That is not the fault of the calling, but the man. This fellow might do well enough. But my point is this, Clare, it

will make him active, and, you will admit, may lead him to anything.'

'If he do not succumb by the way. From the little I know about it, the employment seems very much like an octopus. Once get into its grip, and you rise no more.'

'But strong men subdue octopi like other things to their own uses: only the weak succumb.'

'Then may Hugh be strong!'

'Amen, devoutly.'

'How is Mr. Whinstone?' asked Mrs. Monk, breaking the silence abruptly.

'He is going on satisfactorily, I hear.'

'Look at me, Clare! Bah! you sentimental child!'

CHAPTER VII.

VIGNETTES.

Later in the evening Mrs. Monk and Clare were sitting in that nondescript sanctum of the former's, which the lady had designedly selected for the scene of her first experiment upon Hugh Winlaw. It seemed as though she required this suitable setting for the expression of a peculiar strain of thought which she affected; for never before had she invited her niece to a conference in this particular chamber, and certainly never before, her

niece thought, had she abandoned herself to a vein so singular. There was a good fire in the grate, and the room was illuminated by a lamp suspended from the ceiling, —a noticeable lamp, apparently ancient, and certainly fantastic in design. It represented a dragon in bronze,—a unique and hideous beast,—with wings outstretched, and in its talons the globe which contained the light, and which it seemed to bear away in diabolical triumph. Upon this globe was depicted our world, and the kingdoms of it. The other things were scattered about the room as before,—busts, statuettes, pictures, books, instruments of music,—with no pretence at appropriate arrangement.

'Now, Clare, let us have it out. You don't understand me, and you want an explanation?'

'If it please you.'

'Well, don't look so distressed about it, my dear girl. By-the-by, I see that you have dropped the old appellative. It is doubtless significant; but no matter. It was inevitable, and I have foreseen it. I had hoped, Clare, though, that you would have received it differently.'

'Differently, aunt? Why, do you think I have cared nothing about you? Did you think that I could see old feelings shattered with *in*difference? Did you think that of me?'

'I suppose at certain times I did not. But it is a great misfortune to be so sensitive. I hoped your experience would have counteracted it. I thought once that I was sensitive, or sentimental, whichever you like to call it; but fortunately I have since found out my mistake. If you de-

pend upon other than your own resources, you are doomed to what is generally called wretchedness. The word is relative, and has no meaning for me, happily. Sentiment can't live on itself, Clare, and unfortunately in this world every soul has to dwell alone.'

'I won't believe it,' said Clare, emphatically.

Mrs. Monk smiled.

'I trust it may never be enforced upon you. Delusions do, I know, in many instances hold out to the end. May yours! Will you tell me, dear, what you wish to have explained?'

'Only your attitude at the Hall that evening. You have flitted about the globe impulsively before, and I think little of it. It needs no explanation, for I know the inclination myself. I will dispose of

that by saying that I am grieved you should have thought it necessary to disguise it to me. I have never thought you proper and conventional, aunt, and have never wished to think it. I have thought, though, that there was confidence between us two.'

'Your terms puzzle me, Clare; but to the point. My attitude at the Hall that night was silly. It was such as I thought I was in no danger of falling into now. It was, in short, effeminate. More than that at present I cannot directly tell you. Everything will be clear to you soon. It would help you, dear, if you would only bear in mind what has frequently been mentioned between us. The sole motive and essence of my being is histrionic. To me, literally, all the world is a stage. You have often told me that I ought to have

been an actress, and I believe firmly that, if I could have reduced my temper to artificial proportions, I should have attained to eminence in that direction. I once tried, Clare, but I could not. You were then not even a baby, and, in short, I was lacking food. I then found that I was not wholly an artist. My art seemed petty to me; the boards pitifully narrow. I required the pungency of actuality to give zest to my calling. I could not throw off my part. Perfection of mere effect was not sufficient for me. To what purpose was I for an hour or two a Lady Macbeth to pass forth into the street an ordinary person? It was too tame. I required *to be* that or any other part in the *actual world*, in order to make life at all tolerable to me. This ought to explain everything to you, or at any rate prevent

your regarding with surprise anything I do. Does it satisfy you?'

Clare made no answer; her eyes were fixed upon the fire.

'Hardly?' continued Mrs. Monk. 'It should do, ma mignonne. (I will adopt the phrase since you abandon it.) I have given you a good knowledge of the world, and you should by this be able to draw deductions. Such confessedly being my temperament, does it not occur to you that I have in my career filled various interesting *rôles*,—that, in fact, as the world would say in their jargon, I am a woman with a past? Will not your imagination give you a glimpse into my *répertoire?*'

'Then you went yourself as nurse to the Hall?'

'Tu l' as dit, ma Claire; I did.'

Her aunt had spoken to her before in a

tone equally nonchalant,—if Clare had only reflected, she habitually did so speak; but never had it affected the young lady as it affected her now. Contact with such icy insensibility chilled her, and she shivered. It was as though she had pressed a serpent to her breast, and, now that she felt the movement of the cold coils against her warmth, she shuddered. But the alteration was in herself, not in her aunt.

'Publish it not in Gath,' the latter continued, 'for Gath unquestionably would not understand it. We speak wholly, Clare, for your private satisfaction.'

'Or dissatisfaction,' interposed the young lady. 'It is hardly necessary to mention that.'

Mrs. Monk was leaning far back in her deep chair, her eyes fixed calmly, critically, upon her niece's face, and she just

nodded her acquiescence. The discussion might have been of some purely imaginary character, so dispassionate was her aspect. Severed bonds, it seemed, existed not for her: 'shattered feelings' touched no chord. From Clare she would glance at some other object in the room, and with just as much or as little apparent sensibility.

'Is that all you wish to tell me, aunt?'

'Just as you will. If you are curious, I will draw you a vignette or two. Here is one.'

The lady here made a little flourish with her finger, as if with a wand summoning forth the vision which she wanted.

I.

'See a country house remote, on the slope of a hill, shaded by elm and oak-trees, looking out over a green and fertile

plain, nothing but green, nothing but rank fertility. The spirit of the place an imaginative, lonely child; tearing on a pony's back through lanes and meadows, where blackberries hang like grapes, and hips and haws like great bunches of coral drops: a child that laughs with the woodpecker and screeches with the jay, and whose glory is the autumn wind. Her only companion a French *gouvernante*, more imaginative than herself. Father dead or non-existent; mother honestly acknowledging her an encumbrance, and keeping out of her way. Thus let years go by.

'At ten she has begun to follow the hounds, to receive the homage of all. There is a big man in a red coat that gives her his especial notice, and, occasion fitting and she inclined, takes her on his knee paternally. He befriends her con-

tinually, and loads her with benefits most acceptable to her age. At fifteen she declines the knee, but does not decline the benefits. At seventeen she acquiesces again in both, and at Martinmas that year the little colt is shod.

'Oh, how the bells were tossed in that Martinmas wind! How the dogs in the village howled! The night before, elm-trees had been snapt like beanstalks, and the cock blown from the steeple. The heads of gossips wagged, and the gargoyles looked down at the porch with malicious triumph. But nobody believed them. The priest blessed all.'

Mrs. Monk ceased, and fixed her eye upon Clare, who returned the look, but said nothing.

'Will you have another?'

The young lady nodded.

II.

'See a town house, then, brilliant and palatial, the spirit of the place a goddess of nineteen, dancing upon the lips of the *beau monde* in defiant ecstasy, and hearing in her baby's cry the exhilarating shrieks of the jay. Better the baby than the father of it, but better the world than either of them. The scrolls, that were unfolded to her, stretched from earth to heaven, and the words of them were set in diamonds. She drank them in to her heart's core, but found them barren; they brought no satisfaction. She required more. No vital essence could she wring from them. Thus she awoke to the knowledge of her bonds. She was shod; she was harnessed; she was lashed; but, to herself she whispered, she was not broken in. Freedom she required; freedom she

would regain, though heaven and earth gainsaid her. Action was the breath of life to her; the very regaining of freedom would supply it. Just as she would have taken a hedge—or say a muddy ditch, rather—she took it with coolness and deliberation. Other means she would have chosen, perhaps; but they were not. It must be absolute and irrevocable. She crushed the diamonds without a tremor beneath her heel, and went out into the night alone—alone but free.'

Clare looked at her again, but, beyond a heightened glow in the lady's eyes, her face betrayed nothing unusual.

III.

'Then see a fine dry night, but a wind whistling through the trees of the Mall and St. James's Park. On the last seat

in the corner opposite to Buckingham Palace, the dark outline of a figure, resolutely homeless, penniless, gazing at the stars,—gazing at the large dim gates by the lamp, through which, scarce two years before, the same figure had been whirled in mood quite different—ha, ha! Before dawn the stars were overclouded, and the figure gone.'

IV.

'And now, fourthly and lastly, quite another sky, quite another figure; twelve months have gone. A bright clear sky, this, cloudless and serene, against which the dark tree-clad heights stand out in the minutest outline; no blurring of detail, no generalization of shade; every stick, every stone, its own peculiar shadow, asserting its own particular individuality

in the general result; but beneath it all and blind to it all, a figure grasping gold.

'The blood is hot and feverish, even *her* blood, and the eye unsteady. For ever must the scene appear through *those* eyes, seen but dimly and unconsciously as in delirium, and clogged with gold. For six months it lasted: the glitter and the lights! Stealing from her bed of restless nightmare to the table of the same, might this thing be seen almost daily. She who had braved without a tremor most of the depths that human life can offer, and gloried in every part, was in danger of being conquered here. She saw the fiend.

> '"The night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold."

'But, strange as it may appear, the touch of a child awakened her. The scales fell from her eyes, and she recog-

nised the danger. All her purposes returned to her, and gave fresh life to her shattered nerves.

> ' " 'The game is done! I've won, I've won!'
> Quoth she, and whistles thrice."

'She had gathered gold: she was looked upon as a wonder,—in league with fortune. She fled, and returned no more. Henceforth the world was in her hand, but she used it mildly.'

* * * * * * *

For some time after Mrs. Monk's voice had ceased, there was unbroken silence in the room. Clare had fallen into so deep a reverie that, when her aunt again spoke, it startled her.

'Have *you* any indictment to bring against me?'

'You know I have not, aunt.'

'Then whence your gloom, my girl?

I thought that some wrong must be rankling in your heart.'

'No wrong but that of my own making. It is I that have imposed upon myself. You have always told me the truth, but I have inverted it. If such is your deliberate attitude to life, why did you not bring me up upon it?'

'Because it was not to be yours; I had you educated for the disposition you displayed. Your life, dear girl, upon my principles would have been unmitigated tragedy. I would not impose such upon you for the world.'

'I cannot live on this!' cried Clare, vehemently, rising from her seat.

'So I have told you,' replied her aunt, smiling with the utmost calm. 'It is unfortunate, but inevitable. Do not be angry with me, Clare.'

'I cannot be angry, but I am shocked. My world without you is cheerless, spiritless. You have made the world to me. Can I be indifferent to this? I have nobody else.'

'You will have, unless I am much mistaken.'

Clare had been walking towards the doorway, and now she left the room.

'Singular it is,' mused Mrs. Monk alone. 'What an infernal business it must be! Bah! I should blow my brains out under such a dispensation.'

Never till now had Clare perceived what a singularly lonely life she had led. She had flitted about the world in the company of her aunt, receiving pleasureable impressions from everything she saw, and freely communicating such impressions to this solitary confidante; but of

anything more she had not hitherto felt the need. She had not the faculty of making friends, although acquaintances were not wanting. There was a reticence about her, which was attributed by most to spiritual pride, and Clare had never met the person for whom she was anxious to dispel such notion. Although it had for so long appeared otherwise, now that the positive need for expending it had arisen, she perceived what a wealth of affection lay at her disposal. A warmth of feeling that might have imparted vitality to a universe lay hidden in her bosom; and, might any shivering mortal but have found the mystic Sesame which was the key to it, what a reward awaited him!

For some days she was much alone, climbing frequently down to her sacred nook by the noisy river, or walking on the

road past the pine-wood in the hope of meeting the impressionable little parson. A few words from him always cheered her, for she felt them aglow with the breath of life, and free from all taint of that cold cynical abstraction which had so suddenly become as a deadly poison to her. Mr. Crook readily expanded before much less obvious encouragement than Clare held out to him: towards her he was radiant. And yet neither, for one moment, misunderstood the footing.

Had Clare been less certain of the vicar's proclivity in another direction, needless to say that her behaviour would have been very different: whilst, as regarded Mr. Crook himself, naturally it was just this proclivity which enabled him to indulge so fearlessly this growing intimacy with Clare. The suspension of Paul Whin-

stone's tactics was a genuine trouble to Mr. Crook.

One day the vicar caught Clare passing his gate, and he took her in. She perceived that he was unusually jubilant.

'I have something to show you,' he said; and they went on to the study.

The curiosity was forthwith produced, and, not wholly to the visitor's surprise, it proved to be a finished portrait of Maisie Winlaw.

'Now, Miss Langtoft, your honest opinion. Pardon this bit of weakness; but there is nobody in the universe that I can show it to except yourself,' he added, more gravely.

'In all honesty it is perfectly admirable, Mr. Crook,' replied Clare, after examining the picture in silence.

'You think so!' exclaimed he, laughing and rubbing his hands. 'I don't think it is bad either.'

'Admirable, indeed. But you know what one artist has said,' Clare continued, with her eyes still upon the picture, '"that it is impossible to paint the portrait of a woman unless you are in love with her."'

'It is true,' remarked the vicar: 'quite true.'

As the young lady returned, her mind was running upon this subject. She felt quite a tenderness towards the little man. The element of romance which entered into his affection made it doubly attractive; in Clare's present mood, it seemed to emphasize the genuine significance of it. Playfully she wished that he could paint her portrait,—in that way. But the gate

into the wood resounded, some hundred yards before her, and the current of her reflection was checked. She looked and saw nobody. It must have been somebody going the other way, now hidden by the hedge. From some indefinite impulse—some fit of irresistible curiosity to which all are subject—Clare hastened her steps. When she reached the gate and looked over, there beneath the fir-trees, ascending the slope, was,—well, what Miss Langtoft had in a vague, instinctive way expected, that interesting fellow Hugh Winlaw. She went through the gate, and slammed it loudly after her; he turned and she beckoned him.

'Have you decided anything?'

'Yes, Miss Langtoft,' he replied, with remarkable animation. 'I shall go next week.'

'And what of Maisie?'

'She will live with a friend in the village for twelve months at any rate, I could not take her there at first.'

'I think you are right. But—will she come and stay with me for a few weeks first? I shall be here for some time, I expect, and—and it would be kind of her to come and keep me company.'

'With you, Miss Langtoft?'

'Yes, with me,' replied Clare, laughing at his obvious amazement. 'Is it such a terrible thought? If you are afraid of her being demoralised, I give you my promise that she shall not be idle. I will be answerable to you for her.'

'I can't trust myself to answer you,' said Hugh, soberly. 'You might misunderstand my expressions. That I thank

you from my heart, you already know. But I don't think Maisie had better come, Miss Langtoft.'

'Not!' exclaimed she, in astonishment. 'Why ever not, Hugh?'

'If I must say it, she would be too happy, poor girl. The world is not——'

'She must come, Hugh,' interposed Clare, warmly. 'I wish it. And, if she is too happy, she shall never leave me; tell her that. What care I for the world? I will shield her from it. We will make a world of our own. Her world shall be my world, and, if she will, my world hers.'

Hugh trembled before such words; they shook him to the very foundation of his being. He could only look at her.

'Wouldn't you be happy at the thought

of her with me?' she asked, looking with curious scrutiny into his handsome, well-tanned features. 'Wouldn't you, Hugh?'

'The world would have little more to give me.'

'No, no, you don't mean that,' she said. 'You don't know what the world has yet to give. Sound it, Hugh! Make it yield up everything to you as to a rightful owner; but, for God's sake, keep your heart warm. The intellect is a cold, a poisonous serpent, and it seeks to destroy the heart. Bind it down to its proper place, I beseech you. Let the heart reign. Will you promise me this, as a parting word?'

'I will, Miss Langtoft;' and he took her hand and pressed it warmly.

'Ask Maisie,' she said, with that par-

ticular smile of hers, as she turned to go. 'You can let me know when you come down.'

Hugh made his obeisance, and went on up the hill—and all the world was altered to him. Mists cleared, and he knew now that for her only could he live and die—that, in short, he loved her. Periphrasis could no longer avail him.

At luncheon, Clare said to her aunt,

'Do you mind my having Maisie Winlaw here as a kind of companion, when Hugh goes?'

'My sweet Clare, do not be unjust to me. You speak as though I were altered. I am not; your slightest wish is very much to me, and will be to the end. I am honestly delighted that it is Maisie.'

Later, Mrs. Monk:

'Would you care to come to the Hall with me this afternoon?'

'Certainly. I think we ought to go.'

CHAPTER VIII.

MOOR-COCKS.

Mrs. Whinstone was, of course, always at home to visitors from the Peel, and to-day, if possible, she surpassed even her customary graciousness towards them. Oh, yes, the patient went on excellently; even the substitutionary nurse was everything that could be desired; and Margaret's news was, to say the least, gratifying.

'Margaret's news? I am afraid we are

such recluses, Mrs. Whinstone, that we really don't know what that is.'

Margaret herself was not present, having run to immure herself within the sanctities of her own private room upon a first recognition of the approaching carriage, firmly resolved not to issue thence until similarly assured of its departure.

'Oh, you don't know! She is engaged to Mr. Walter Selby. You know Walter, of course? Such a good young fellow! He has been a favourite of mine ever since he was a baby. And he is Sir Robert's heir, you know,' added the lady, with a significant movement of the brows. 'We country people think something of that yet, Mrs. Monk.'

'It *is* gratifying, to be sure. Let me congratulate you, Mrs. Whinstone, most

sincerely. It will quite cheer you, after all your late trouble. Do they think of an early marriage?'

'From what Walter says, they do. It seems that poor Sir Robert has set his heart upon seeing Walter married, so that they think it ought not to be put off long. Poor Sir Robert wants it at once—he was always a hasty, impulsive man—and of course he feels——but really there must be a little time. I never think it is seemly to rush into these things just as if it was nothing but a matter of business. Do you, dear?'

'I have hardly formed an opinion about it,' replied Clare, with a smile, thus directly referred to. 'Of course the particular circumstances make a difference in each case.'

Mrs. Whinstone had thought her favourite unusually reserved throughout the whole of the interview.

'To be sure they do, my dear; but there are so many things to be considered. Certainly, Walter is not especially young; but, if he should be hurried into it without the fullest reflection, how dreadful for them both! I must say that I do not think it is wise of poor Sir Robert; but it is very natural.'

'Very, very,' assented Mrs. Monk. 'And, as you say, they are not young. Besides, I am afraid, if we calculated everything, Mrs. Whinstone, it is ju-st possible that—don't you think so?—that we should not get married at all.'

Poor Clare was getting positively exasperated by the conversation. Every

word that issued from her aunt caused her the acutest irritation. Even the inevitable insincerities of ordinary social intercourse were an abomination to her; but the insincerities of her aunt went quite beyond them. All the world seemed a sham—a farce, beside her; her presence a hateful, distorting medium. But a few days ago she had imposed upon this lady as another being!

'Oh, Mrs. Monk, you are too cynical. I did not quite mean that. A true marriage seems to me the most beautiful thing in the world. And I know there are true ones.'

'Plenty, happily,' said Mrs. Monk, with all the fervour of conviction.

At this point Mr. Crook was announced, and the conversation was changed.

As they drove home, Mrs. Monk was persistent in conversing.

'What do you think of Miss Whinstone, Clare?'

'I don't like her.'

'I don't, but she rather interests me. Would you think favourably of a man who wished to marry her?'

'I should think him a fool.'

'We agree again. But these instances of folly are amusing. I often speculate whether, if it were possible to enlighten by any means their foolishness, such men ought to be assisted—to be enlightened. What would you say?'

'I should decide by their motive. If it were simply idle foolishness, enlighten them—if you can; if base, say avaricious foolishness, leave them to their own lesson.'

'Why, you speak like an oracle, my dear. Which, then, is poor Selby?'

'The first, I should think. He cannot have much commercially to gain by the marriage. I suppose her black eyes have deluded him.'

Mrs. Monk laughed strangely, and Clare looked at her, but quickly withdrew her eyes.

'You are right, Clare, I think. The veriest imbecile ought not to be sacrificed for her. You must help me to rescue Selby.'

'I! No hand will I have in the matter.'

'Then I will do it alone; but, mark my word, that marriage shall never be.'

'I cannot bear the woman,' said Margaret to her brother, about the same

time. 'There is something devilish about her.'

'Come, that's rather strong. But I don't care for her like I used to do, I will say. I shall never forget that nurse on the stairs. I could have sworn that it was Mrs. Monk in disguise, just for a second. When I looked again, it had gone. It was a curious thing, wasn't it?'

'It was; but it is more curious that I always felt the same hatred for that nurse as I do for this Mrs. Monk. She frightened me. I could fancy that I had dreamed about her, some time or other, in a nightmare. You said she was so seldom here, Paul. Why, she has been here ever since I came, and shows no likelihood of going. I wish she would,' said Margaret, with a little shudder.

'She'll go some time, Meg, don't fear.

If you dislike her so much, you can easily avoid her. Well, I'm off.'

'Oh, are you going out again?' exclaimed his sister, in an aggrieved tone. 'You never stay with me now.'

Paul made a facetious rejoinder and went.

Paul had of late developed a remarkable passion for long moorland rides,—rides beginning often early in the afternoon, and, to the utter disregard of dinner, stretching beyond the hours of twilight. His figure was becoming familiar to dwellers in distant dales and remote farm-houses, where he would occasionally alight for needful refreshment. As it was generally dusk, or dark outright, when he came back, nobody had paid particular heed to his movements, but, if anyone had been disengaged enough to do so, it might have been observed that

in whatever direction he set forth—and in this he displayed entire freedom from partiality—invariably he returned by one and the same road. These rides seemed to constitute the central interest of Paul's existence.

Margaret could not fail to notice, and with ample chagrin she did notice, the supreme indifference which he displayed towards these vital preparations of hers. Despite his professed reconciliation, she was quite sure that Kidland's disappointment rankled in his mind; and that had she been content with a paltry Mrs., forsooth, all his subsequent behaviour would have been very different. Lady Selby was nothing to him! What inscrutable creatures were men!

To say truth, Margaret gave Paul credit for too much feeling in the matter. It was

not from any sense of frustrated predilections that he treated her proceedings with such irritating disregard. Had she been about to marry one of the royal princes, or indeed the favoured Alan himself, it is not to be supposed that he would have displayed any additional curiosity in her concerns. It was merely that his own interests demanded his undivided attention, and to them he unreservedly gave it.

Paul had set off on one of his circuitous rides to-day, and later, when far out over the moor, he had alighted upon old Isaac Outchester cutting gorse, or whin, as the shepherd himself would call it, to stick into the top of the stone dyke which the sheep were so fond of louping. The old man, from a distance, had presented such a striking figure to the rider, working on there in such impressive silence,—and, save

for his dog, such absolute solitude,—that Paul had turned his horse in that direction with the purely benevolent intention of giving to Isaac the sound of a human voice. The dog had given timely notice of the young man's approach, so that the shepherd was prepared.

'Tarr'ble het, sir, tarr'ble het,' said Isaac, in response to Paul's greeting, resting upon the handle of his bill-hook to look upwards as he spoke. 'Braw weather for the hairst. The shearers 'ull be busy doon the country, daur say.'

'Yes, they are beginning in several places. There are good crops, too.'

'Ah—ha; how gans the maister?'

'Oh, he gets on well, thank you. He'll get out for a bit in a few days.'

'That's weel,' nodded Isaac.

'Are you going to send anything to Alwinton this year?'

'Na, na; I ha' deen wi' Allenton; they didna judge me fair, ye ken. They should put it in ither hands; ou, ay.'

'I haven't heard any other complaints,' said Paul.

'Have ye no? But there's plenty mair nor me. I'll gan to Yetholm this time, hinny.'

'I should do if you're dissatisfied, certainly. I hope you'll be successful.'

'I hope sae, tae.'

Paul drew his horse round to go on his way, and Isaac again looked up at him.

'Good-day, Isaac.'

'Let an auld man say yae word to you, hinny. Are ye for Braidstruther?'

'I expect I shall go down that way,' replied Paul, lightly.

'Then dinna gan that way. Tak to the south o' the lough.'

'Why, what's the matter? Whatever do you mean?' Paul asked, displaying his surprise.

'Dae what I say, and ne'er heed the why.'

'Isn't Hugh there, then?'

'Ye ken nicely that he's no there,' replied the old man, stepping up to his bridle solemnly. 'Do you think the muircocks hae nae een, man?'

'The moorcocks may be damned,' said Paul, and rode away without further parley.

'My certie! there'll be mischief atween 'em, I'se warr'nd,' mumbled Isaac, as he returned to his gorse-cutting. 'George is a dour callant, and 'ull strike.'

Maisie was sitting alone, and idle. Her brother had communicated Miss Langtoft's

wish to her, and to his complete amazement she had received it with something short of ecstasy. Doubtless, his first thought was also hers, so he proceeded to enlarge upon the various aspects of it. At length, —yes, Maisie thought she would go, but obviously enthusiasm was wanting. Possibly she was shy; she had lived so much alone. The first few days would alter it. For the present Hugh had ample ardour for two.

Now that the young woman sat alone, she was revolving it again. In itself certainly it was fascinating, and was such as but a few weeks ago she would have received vehemently enough to satisfy her brother. It had now to be viewed with reference to the general situation, and thus presented various aspects.

In the deepening twilight she considered

them. Her window was open, and through it came the ceaseless babble of the burn hard by, the occasional plaint of a restless sheep, or the grumble of a grouse ; but the universal stillness was supreme. Through the top pane the girl could see a single star, and she frequently looked towards it. As it gained brilliancy, she no longer pretended to be thinking of her plans. They lay not with her ; they should be decided for her, and that, soon—soon. A tremulousness was upon her, which every moment seemed to intensify. She went to the window, and thrust her head out to listen,—only that water, more distinct, over the whole of that silent country,—no thud, thud of a hoof upon the peat. To look was useless, as the wide expanse of moor was growing dim,—merely a dark featureless surface ending in a bald undu-

lation against the sky, from that point not a tree, nor a stone to break the sullen uniformity; nevertheless, Maisie looked.

She had but just withdrawn, when there was a knock upon the door, and her heart was in her throat. No horse; was it he? A tremor passed over her at a thought which would arise, but she quelled it, and hastened to the door. As she opened it, again she shivered. The figure standing there was dim, but instinctively she recognized it, and would have shut it out. A stronger hand opposed her, and she abandoned the effort.

'I will not have you here,' said Maisie, emboldened by opposition. 'You have no right to break into my house.'

'Nae right! I will speak to you, if I batter down the door. Come in!'

She followed him into the kitchen, feel-

ing powerful in her anger, and destitute of fear. With singular calmness she lit the lamp, and then looked at her antagonist. She stood with one hand upon the table, and her whole figure erect in an attitude of graceful strength. There was a wonderful dignity in her demeanour, which for a moment seemed to impress the man who stood before her.

'There was ne'er a woman like you,' he said, after glaring at her in silence. 'I would go to hell for you.'

'I dinna thank you for saying it. Go on!'

'You thank me for nothing,' he said, with extreme bitterness. 'I may love you as never a man loved a woman in this world before; I may be a slave for years to you; I may roam about the hills whole nights for you, with those horrible black

clouds just over me, rolling on without a sound to gie you warning; and what do you gie me for it a'?'

'Nothing!' asserted Maisie, fearlessly. 'I have given you nothing, and I will give you nothing, and so I aye have told you. I never asked you to love me; I never asked you to be my slave, nor to wander wi' the clouds for me. I have never by one look deceived you. What mair would you have me do?'

'Can a man live on what you have *no* done?' he asked, scornfully. 'You dinna think it.'

'Then he must live on something else: he will get nae mair from me.'

'Who will get mair?'

'Stand back! You have no right to ask me the question. Whoever I like to give it to.'

'Are you daft, lass, that you gan on so? Do you think I'll let you gan to the devil without lifting my hand to stop you? You ken little of my love, if that's your thought. What do you think he'll do for you?'

'Are you to look after me, then?' she asked, with a contemptuous smile. 'Am I to ask you what I may do and what I may not do? Is that what you wish? Tell me, man!'

He turned his face aside.

'You told me that you would never marry anybody if you didna marry me.'

'It's a lie. I told you that I would never marry you; and that I should never marry anybody. No more I shall.'

A sound was now audible through the open window,—the sound for which Maisie

had previously listened, but which fell upon her ear at last with startling suddenness. She looked at her companion and he at her.

'Who's riding so late?' he asked; but she gave no answer.

The heavy tramp of the hoofs was now close beside the window, and the champing of the bit. Maisie's face was firm, but pale. No doubt, of set purpose, the window remained open and the blind up. In a moment a head was thrust in. Rutherford made a movement, but the girl's hand was instantly upon him.

'You shall not move,' she said, with quiet determination. 'Ride on, Mr. Whinstone.'

Paul simply stared in amazement. He recognized Rutherford in the lamplight, but had never known of his suit to Maisie.

The fellow's face and the young woman's attitude stirred his blood, and he went immediately to the door and entered the house. As he came in, Maisie tightened her clutch upon Rutherford's coat.

'What is the matter?' said Paul, grasping the riding-whip in his hand. 'Dare the fellow——'

'Nothing is the matter, sir: ride on at once.'

'I shall certainly not leave you in this way, Miss Winlaw. What are you doing here, Rutherford?'

'What are *you* doing here?' replied the man, fiercely, his pale face flushed with anger and a supreme effort at self-restraint. 'Is not one warning enough for you? Do you think, because you hae robbed us of everything else, that you can rob us of our women, too? Dinna think it, man! We

can defend them, at any rate; sae gan your ways, and tak heed to what I say.'

Rutherford turned away when he had spoken, and Paul, who was about to make some angry answer, was checked by a sign from Maisie.

'Ride on,' she said, in an imperious tone. 'It is not kind of you to stay here.'

'If you wish it, I will go,' said Paul, and left the house abruptly.

When the steps of the horse had died away, Maisie closed the window and drew down the blind. Although to appearance firm, her hand trembled excessively, and, now that the immediate strain was removed, she was very conscious of her weakness. From the window she went to a chair and sat down. Rutherford, who

had watched every movement, now came towards her.

'Do you think *he* will marry you, Maisie?'

'I will talk no more about it. I want to be left alone.'

The man looked into her face fixedly and silently, the expression of his features swiftly changing as he gazed. His looks betrayed the unbalanced temperament whence his conduct sprang. The unmeasured anger which had but just so completely, so blindly, swayed him; the consuming hatred from which a moment ago even this girl had by no means seemed to be secure, was dissolving into a tenderness as unreasoning and unsound. Maisie shrank before this, as before the other she had grown bold. With trepidation she saw his face stretched towards her, watched

his lips quiver, and his eyes—yes,—grow dim with tears.

'Hear me again, lassie; give me another chance,' he said,—in laying his hand upon the girl's shoulder he inadvertently touched her neck. 'I canna believe *this*: I winna believe it, if all the devils yelled it in my ear. Maisie, give me yae word o' hope! I'll bide on it for years. Just yae word, will ye now?'

'I have told you all I have to tell,' said she, calmly removing his hand: 'leave me now.'

In a minute or two Maisie was sitting alone, and she heard through the open doors the voice of a bird startled in the heather.

CHAPTER IX.

PUPILAGE.

A BOISTEROUS west wind was surging through the pine-trees, and the low thick clouds, which all the day had brooded over the hill country, were being torn from their hold and tossed towards the sea. In the zenith and the east large gaps appeared, through which were seen the snow-white curls of spray flung over the azure depth, the purity of their celestial hue heightened by contrast with the murky frame around. The rays of the

sun skipped from hill to vale, and from the valleys to the hills again, transforming at each step a patch of gloomy earth into a radiant garden of their own. From the sheltered road between the woods Mr. Whinstone watched it, gathering strength.

Summer was on the wane, and already the robin's voice was heard at matins and at evensong cheerily crying blessings for the apples. Even this the gentleman noticed, and he had to confess to himself that never had he been so much interested in natural history before. For this piece of road he had expressed a peculiar partiality, chiefly, it was to be supposed, that he might watch the tawny, bright-eyed squirrels scamper up the fir-trunks, playing hide-and-seek with him as they ascended, and hear them triumphantly scold him from an unassailable altitude. Day

after day, when the weather was fine enough, hither was he brought in his bath-chair, and, as the footman wheeled him to and fro, Margaret generally by his side, Mr. Whinstone could make these and other natural observations with little danger of interruption. The young lady's prattle seemed unusually pleasant to him, and in no way to interfere with his peculiar reflections. He answered her or not as the humour took him.

On this particular afternoon he had been noticeably genial, and had entered more fully into the topics of conversation. Hitherto, Margaret thought, he had shown scant disposition to converse about their neighbours at the Peel, a voluntary remark of his now, therefore, caused her some surprise.

'Did you ever know Mrs. Monk before

you came here, Margaret?' he had said, in reply to a suggestion of the young lady's that they should be turning homewards.

'How strange of you to ask that question!' she exclaimed. 'I was just thinking of the very same thing. I have often thought about it lately, especially since your first nurse left. That nurse and Mrs. Monk both remind me of somebody, but who it is I don't remember. The likeness, and my feelings about it, grow stronger the more I think of it. It must be somebody I have seen long ago. Not Mrs. Monk herself, of course. It seems to me now that it was quite a plain kind of woman, and not a lady.'

'H'm—singular,' remarked Mr. Whinstone, drily. 'Mrs. Monk never has a daughter with her, has she?'

'I have never heard Paul speak of one.

Only this niece. Do you think I have ever seen her before, father?' asked Margaret, abruptly, and with some eagerness.

'I myself do not know Mrs. Monk. I have never seen her.'

They had just reached the extremity of the wood where they met the wind, and where consequently they always turned. They had traversed the sheltered space several times, and with satisfaction Margaret considered this to be the last. The gloomy piece of road, hemmed in by those dark deep woods, from the depths of which the herons would occasionally give such an unearthly screech, was not exhilarating to the young lady.

'You must see her before you go,' said Margaret, glancing along the straight vista of trees before her. 'Perhaps, then, you

—why, father, she is coming,' added she.

'Yes, it is; before us, look.'

There was a figure visible in the road ahead; the figure of a lady walking towards them.

'She will be going to the vicarage. They often go there.'

From that point the apparition imposed silence upon Margaret at least. Her father tried to sustain the conversation in the same easy vein as heretofore, but without success. As the lady drew nearer, Margaret asked,

'Shall we stop, father?'

'Certainly, if she is so disposed. You know the lady, and must be polite to her. Introduce me properly.'

Mrs. Monk approached with all her ease and stateliness of manner, and Mr. Whin-

stone's eyes were fixed immovably upon her.

'She lied to me; she lied to me,' was his instant and only thought.

The gentleman was yet far from strong, a fact which no doubt explained the fluttering sensation which troubled him in the face of the approaching interview. Having given up the problem of the woman, no question was suggested to him as to why she had done this,—as to what new departure it gave evidence of. In his weakness he was conscious of subjection, and that was enough.

A calm smile played about Mrs. Monk's features during the introduction. As even Mr. Whinstone felt, it was impossible that there could be ill-will in this,—but it was strange. It rather betokened a complacent —supreme, certainly, but kindly patronage.

But Margaret nevertheless felt revolt and —fear.

Outward propriety there was on the part of all, and the lady passed on.

'Strange creature,' mused Mr. Whinstone, as he and his daughter went homewards in silence.

Just as they were entering their own gates, the gentleman looked up at Margaret's face, abruptly and with a singularly critical gaze.

'What is it?' she said.

He withdrew his eyes, and, audibly at least, said nothing. To himself, 'She had a daughter, of course.'

Soon father and daughter, not without relief, parted.

Mrs. Monk, then, had voluntarily revealed herself to him, and his suspicions, long held, were transformed into positive

information. She was not poor, as for years she had represented to him; represented, not from mercenary motives, for always persistently had she declined his aid, pecuniary or other. Curiosity, at least, was satisfied.

Towards evening Mr. Whinstone grew restless, and before the sun had set Mrs. Monk received a note from the Hall. Perhaps she had expected it. She read this:

'I do not pretend to guess why you have done this. At least tell me, is this girl my wife's daughter? Let me have conclusive proof.'

The reply, which Mrs. Monk immediately wrote and sent, was this:

'I thought you were satisfied. You shall have further proof. To-morrow evening, at eight, I will see you in your library.

As the confirmation must affect Mr. Walter Selby, I require that he be in the house to hear it, if we so decide.'

Shortly after dispatching this communication, Mrs. Monk was with her niece.

'I think you said that you were going to Newcastle to-morrow, Clare?'

'Yes, aunt. Can I do anything for you?'

'No, thank you, dear. If it is convenient, I should like you to be back here by eight o'clock in the evening, as I have an appointment at which I should wish you to be present.'

'I will be here at the time.'

Such a request aroused little wonder in Miss Langtoft now, whatever it would have done a month or two ago. Instinctively she had felt that there was some-

thing more to come, and, for the sake of her own composure, she cared not how soon it came. She had been wholly unable to throw off that feeling of discomfort which the proximity of her aunt inspired; and, what was more, had failed to reap the spiritual satisfaction from the companionship of Miss Winlaw, upon which she had so confidently built. Clare felt that the girl was changed. In this case, also, was it that the change was in herself? Surely not. After allowing an ample margin for nervousness at new surroundings and the like, there still remained an inexplicable residue of reserve and unexpected coldness in Maisie's conduct. Pre-occupied she seemed, and at times mistrustful.

After leaving Mrs. Monk, Clare withdrew to her own room. Maisie was sit-

ting there, having just come in. It was a dark evening outside, and damp and cold; Maisie's complexion was exquisitely coloured by contact with the night-air, and Miss Langtoft looked at her with admiration. She fancied that she perceived something of the girl's brother about her.

'I have decided to go to-morrow, Maisie,' said Clare, standing with her hand on the mantel-piece. 'I shall come back by the five train.'

'Yes, Miss Langtoft,' was the reply.

'Are you sure that you are happy with me here?'

Maisie's cheeks, nay her whole face, flushed at Clare's glance.

'Oh, yes,' she said, with unnecessary emphasis.

'I hope you are.'

Neither felt much satisfaction, however, in the assurance. For a moment, indeed, Maisie's tongue moved in an attempt at articulation, perchance to modify the admission, but no words came. For long she had thought that to this one friend she could speak, that perhaps she, who had travelled in many strange lands and seen many people, might understand her; but now, when the moment had come, it was beyond her, and her tongue refused its office. In an instant more she was resolute; strength and independence had returned to her, and she rejoiced that she had not spoken. Alone she could stand.

But the fluttering of which she was conscious did not leave her that night, screen it as she might. The heightened colour which enhanced the girl's beauty

was not the effect of the cold air alone; nor the tremulousness of mere weakness of the nerves.

Scarce half-an-hour before, she had been listening, in the darkness, to the drops of moisture falling from time to time from the tips of the fir-needles. All dark and still around her, but light and tumult enough within. By a trunk she had stood, expecting, and her fingers had played nervously upon the scaly bark. She had not been long alone.

'You will come, Maisie? Yes, yes. The world shall be opened to you. You shall find all that you have longed for, my beautiful girl. Come now, to-night. We can catch the night train. Will you come, dearest.'

'Not to-night. I cannot go to-night.'

'But it is better to go without preparation, far better. Scott will think you are my sister. I will manage it all, trust me.'

'Not to-night,' repeated Maisie. 'I cannot leave them like that.'

'Then to-morrow night, darling? I will have everything ready. You will come, then?'

The girl gave no answer. He drew her more closely to him, and he knew of her acquiescence.

'At half-past eight,' he went on. 'I will meet you at the front gate. Leave all to me . . . Come, Maisie, and you shall be mine; all my own . . .'

Miss Langtoft made no effort to draw the girl into conversation that night, for she herself was in no talkative mood. In

the morning Maisie seemed affectionate—unusually so, Clare thought—but still subdued. When the young lady was in the carriage on the way to the station, she thought much of the manner in which Maisie had bidden her farewell. Extravagant in its intensity, it had seemed to her in view of the few hours' separation before them. It appeared that here, too, she was veering towards disappointment.

'Delusions,' was the word which the rattle of the train thrust persistently upon her, but she defied it.

For an hour or two Clare wandered about the streets of Newcastle in pensive mood. Shopping had not been the object of her visit; merely philosophical speculation, rather, judging by her behaviour now. She had seen most places in Europe which we consider worth seeing; but she

was not conscious of having been so peculiarly impressed by any place as by this to-day. From the streets she passed downwards to the quay, and from the quay to the streets again; but everywhere the Cyclopean power of man was thrust irresistibly upon her. The face of heaven for ever excluded from her gaze; the sound of the anvil for ever in her ear. Here was vociferously asserted the apotheosis of the material—and that alone.

Clare returned to the quay again, and so to the footway of the High Level Bridge. Midway across the river, she stood to regard the prospect once more. The murky water rolled onwards to the sea, between its high and precipitous banks; banks or precipices no longer as nature made them, bare or green; but turned to their inevitably material account. House rising upon

house abruptly from the river bed, clinging literally to the face of the cliff, and crowned at the summit by a Norman keep, and, more dimly, a graceful steeple. Clare looked at it all, and mused.

'What would old Bede have said to this, Miss Langtoft?'

The words had been uttered close beside her, and turning she faced Hugh Winlaw.

'H-e-l-l,' she readily replied, and shook hands with the speaker.

'I think so,' said he, laughing.

'I was coming to see you,' Miss Langtoft began, turning to walk onwards. 'Do you go home at mid-day?'

'Generally.'

'Are you going now? Can you give me some dinner.'

Hugh smiled complacently.

'With pleasure.'

They walked on together.

What surprise either felt in the encounter did not appear, nor was any further reference made to the cause of Clare's presence there. Each was conscious of a sense of satisfaction at the sound of the other's voice, and perhaps each accepted the meeting as a natural and preordained occurrence.

'You once spoke to me of this stupendous scene; it is stupendous,' remarked Clare. 'Does it weary you?'

'Sometimes, but I would not yet be out of it. I find that the contrast sharpens my perception of the significance of other scenes. This makes it valuable.'

'Yes, certainly. And your work?'

Hugh shook his head.

'You were right,' he said. 'It is either demoralising or intolerable.'

'But I have never said such a thing.'

'No, Miss Langtoft, not expressly; but such is your thought. Isn't it?'

'What should lead you to think so, I can't tell; but since you ask me so plainly I must say that I have always thought journalism incompatible with the best culture.'

'And it is,' asserted Hugh. 'It destroys the soul. It saps all spiritual development. Our energies are directed to the pettinesses of life, to the current trivialities of a day or of a minute. It is old Bunyan's picture of the muck-rake with a modern application. It is, as you say, journalism versus culture. I am uneducated, but I know what you mean by culture. Journalism does not satisfy me.'

'I thought it would not,' said Clare, 'and I am glad of it.'

'I shall abandon it,' Hugh continued, looking fixedly at the pavement. 'I shall return to my sheep; with them at least I can make progress. I shall not again slumber.'

There was a short silence.

'No, you must not return to your sheep.'

Again a moment's silence, then Clare proceeded.

'You must not abandon the haunts of men. The rush of civilization is a stimulus to self-education. Your intellectual development must take place amidst it. Believe me, Hugh, it must. You will lose time if, yet, you return to the hills.'

Clare spoke with ardour as if propound-

ing plans for her own future, instead of merely giving advice to another.

'You have so much to see and to learn. You must be free for some years yet. You must not dwarf yourself for want of experience. Go amongst them with eyes and ears open. Study; cultivate your artistic sense, especially of course in literature. *That* must be your means of expression, but do not be narrow. Let all art mould you. Only aim high enough, and something you *must* do. You must go; you shall go.'

Hugh listened with a tremor to this enthusiastic outburst. It was merely an utterance of what probably in his inmost soul he would have craved for, had material circumstances left him free to his wishes.

'I will return to the hills, Miss Lang-

toft. I can work there. I will get books: you will lend me more. Nowhere can I command so much leisure.'

'You will forgive me, Mr. Winlaw—will perhaps misunderstand me,' replied Clare. 'I am naturally interested in your progress. Believe me, I detest patronage. The sense is not in me. But I am resolved that you shall perfect yourself. To-morrow you will receive twenty-five pounds,—this is ludicrously practical, but I can at times be practical,—and henceforth every three months you will receive a similar sum. Hush, please. The money will be transmitted to you through a business channel, and you spend it or no as you think best. The only condition that I attach to it is, that every Christmas you write me a story or something else that you may at the time feel to be your fittest

means of expression. I have been before you in getting some worldly experiences; if you will avail yourself of them, you must ask. Do you accept this proposition?'

'I do, Miss Langtoft.'

'It is well.'

For some distance they went on in silence. They had ascended the precipitous street, passed the parish church, and were now in a quieter part. Needless to say it was still an inclined street, on one side of which were modest houses with a small patch of garden railed in before them. At length Hugh opened a gateway and Miss Langtoft passed in before him.

In the sitting-room which they entered, upon half the table were spread preparations for a meal. On a coarse white cloth was a discoloured cruet-stand, a small piece

of cold beef before it, a glass salt-cellar, and bone spoon, a loaf of bread, a plate and knife and fork, and a tumbler and jug. Miss Langtoft took off her things, and Hugh rang the bell. Some additional things were brought up for the visitor, and a dish of potatoes which had been kept warm for some time. The two then sat down.

As soon as they had begun, Hugh did ask for the experiences to which the young lady had alluded during their previous conversation, and from this they drifted into a general discussion of Hugh's future tactics. He himself was rigidly composed; all the enthusiasm was on the side of his guest. Clare zealously shadowed forth his course of conduct. She expatiated upon the highways and the byways of the life artistic so far as they were known to

her and understood of her. Books in every possible branch of art must he devour: theatres, galleries, libraries, must he frequent: into every phase of life must he peer. Such was the tenor of her advice, and doubtless she meant well.

'Produce something every day of your life,' she said at one time. 'Make abundant notes of thoughts and glimpses, as an artist keeps a sketch-book. And especially keep a diary. It is well to review what one has really done in the day; it serves as a corrective to excessive contemplation. Produce, Hugh; produce: that is the one thing needful.'

'Why, you are an artist yourself, Miss Langtoft,' remarked Winlaw, with a smile.

'I? Oh, dear, no! But I have talked with those that are. In artistic work, whether with the pen or the brush, much

is commonly talked about the mood, being in the vein, and so forth. It has a groundwork, of course; but I have been assured by those who know, that the mood and the vein may be superinduced by systematic habit, whilst many watch for it to their dying day. The greatest artists have been the most laborious workers.'

In such converse their meal was completed, and Clare was not conscious of her fare being more homely than that of which she was in the habit of partaking. Hugh had never known such a meal in the whole course of his life. Ambrosia and nectar had been his viands.

When the table was cleared, Miss Langtoft sat in an arm-chair. Hugh got down a book of which he wished to speak to his visitor, and upon that subject they talked. Soon they had to set off to the station.

'I have not yet spoken of the one subject which brought me here,' said Clare, when they were again in the street. 'Your sister; I undertook to be answerable for her. Is she in love?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Do you know of any dissatisfaction she is feeling at her position with me?'

'Indeed I do not. It cannot be possible.'

'She is changed; she is not at peace, and I wished you to know it.'

'I can conceive no reason for such a thing, except—yes, it may be that; but the fellow dare not annoy her.'

Hugh explained the state of things between his sister and Rutherford.

'I didn't know of that,' remarked Clare. 'That may possibly explain it. Do you think I might broach the matter to her?

Or better, would you write and ask her to be open with me?'

'Certainly, I will.'

Hugh watched the train curve out of the station, and then slowly he withdrew. He descended the Castle stairs, and so to the quay. As he walked along, drunken in his ecstasy, he saw the boat which was about to start down the river to Tynemouth. Instantly he booked and went aboard, and for the rest of the day he flitted restlessly from point to point, hugging a wild joy to his breast in unquestioning abandonment.

On her return from this journey, Clare found the atmosphere of the Peel less congenial than it had been before. The glow of her idealism was damped as she

approached the place, a chill impersonality enshrouding it as in a fog. Not until she neared the house had the thought of her aunt's problematical appointment occurred to her. It now seemed more curious than in her former mood she had deemed it; but, be it what it might, she was doggedly prepared.

Dinner was rather earlier than usual, as though to accommodate Miss Langtoft after the trials of her journey; nor was the ceremony a prolonged one. After it, when Mrs. Monk and her niece were alone, the following words were exchanged between them:

'To-night, Clare, I must relinquish my stewardship. Have you any final remarks to make upon it?'

The young lady looked at her in doubt. Despite the preparation of later days,

this was an astounding blow to Clare.

'I don't understand you, aunt.'

'A month or two ago it was quite within the possible that this night had never come,' the elder lady proceeded; 'for you I study chiefly, and I believe you would have preferred it so. Things have turned otherwise, and it is useless longer to delay it. You will, I am sure, be glad to readjust our relationship, for I see that intercourse becomes difficult with you.'

'I wish it could always have been as of old,' said Clare.

'It would not always have satisfied you, dear. Now, at any rate, prepare for changes. I don't think you ought to regard me altogether with disfavour, for without me the world would have been rather different to you. It is more than probable that after to-night we shall dwell

apart. Have you anything final to say to me?'

'No,' said Clare, not without pain. 'I cannot speak to you in this way. You *must* know what I feel about it.' And tears fell from her eyelashes.

Mrs. Monk regarded her with the most disinterested calmness.

'Very good. I have an appointment at the Hall for eight o'clock. The carriage will be ready directly, and I wish you to accompany me.'

Clare left the room without speaking.

CHAPTER X.

READJUSTMENT.

The ancestors looked down with a peculiarly grim satisfaction upon that meeting in the library. Mr. Whinstone sat in a chair upon one side of the hearthrug; Mrs. Whinstone in a chair upon the other; and Mrs. Monk stood before them. This latter lady was radiantly handsome, and was clad of set purpose in a magnificent robe. The eyes of both her subjects were perforce fixed upon her, held there as much by involuntary admiration as by surprise.

There was nothing emotional about her; a calm, critical enjoyment of the situation the only expression of her features.

'Explanations are needless,' she was saying; 'you would not understand more if I offered them. Lunacy is a relative term. One half of the world is permanently lunatic to the other half. It were simplest for you to adjudge me so. I found some satisfaction in this thing, and pursued it: that dismisses my attitude from the discussion. In another respect, madam, you are entitled to more. Your husband has for more than twenty years been content to repose under a ridiculous imputation. He is not a lunatic: he did not fling his daughter from his door. It was to me that he entrusted her, in pursuance of a pledge. Over him, a man of social aspirations, I had power, and to this purpose I

turned it. Your daughter I demanded, and he gave her. To-night I restore her to you. Hitherto you have known her as Miss Langtoft.'

The lady paused to regard the two individuals before her. Mrs. Whinstone moved the spectacles on her nose; her husband looked to the floor, smiling.

'The other girl is—a daughter of my own.'

Therewith Mrs. Monk walked across to the door and passed out. There was an impressive silence in the room when she had left it, but in a moment it was broken by her return, accompanied by Clare. To the drawing-room Mrs. Monk had proceeded.

'Clare!'

The young lady instantly responded to the raised finger.

'Is not Paul here?'

'He has just gone out.'

'Will you come into the library?'

Mr. Selby and Margaret remained alone behind.

Mrs. Monk closed the library door again behind her, and walked forward to the hearth-rug with her companion.

'Now, ma Claire,' said the lady, vivaciously, 'here is the light that you have been in need of. This is your mother; your father, there. I am not of you. *Voilà tout!*'

'You are not my aunt?' asked Clare, composedly.

'I am no kin to you. My kindred is of another colour. You understand it all—*n'est-ce-pas?* Through him, my freedom.' The lady pointed to Mr. Whinstone with a peculiar smile. 'Socially, it is not ap-

proved of, hence a bond. All the rest you can fit in. I don't think you need curse me.'

Clare said no more.

'Will you kindly fetch the other two?'

The young lady withdrew in silence.

The lovers were subdued as soon as they stood in the sombre atmosphere of the library. Selby did not pretend to understand the situation, and could only suppose that it had some relation to family settlements or other matrimonial red-tapeism of the kind with which he could feel little patience. Margaret's giggle had died away in the doorway, and in view of Mrs. Monk she did not feel the inclination to revive it. The lady had fixed her eyes immovably upon the girl from the moment of her entrance.

Of the whole assembly, to a curious

onlooker, these two would probably have demanded the first attention. In their appearance, but more particularly in their features, if now carefully regarded, there was more piquant suggestion of individuality than in any of the others. Something beyond the conventional rut, whether for better or for worse, peeped out of them, tickling the fancy. Something lawless; something antagonistic to the trammels of the finer sensibilities was apparent in both, the expression of which seemed peculiarly emphasised by proximity to each other. Even Mrs. Monk's features so far relaxed as to betray an aspect of scorn; the young lady's, unmistakably, one of timorous hate. By one consent, upon these two the interest of all was instantly fixed.

'You do not like me, Miss Whinstone,' Mrs. Monk began, in a tone of conciliation:

'you have taken no pains to conceal it. Can you tell me why?'

Margaret was partially disarmed by this unexpectedly personal commencement.

'You are mistaken, Mrs. Monk,' she replied, with readiness. 'If I——'

'Bah! Look at their faces! The moment for compliments is gone. They find something serious in it.'

Margaret stared around as though startled, and drew nearer to Mr. Selby's chair.

'Do you recollect a face something similar to mine? Look at me.'

'Yes, I do.'

'I thought so, and you hated it always. Now, listen. The reason of your hatred is simple: according to the flesh, I am your mother. In the spirit in which I bore you to your father, you live. It is

the law of nature. No, no, this is not your father. *He* cumbers the earth no longer. He might have made life different for you had he chosen, but he preferred that the winds only should be your inheritance. I could not be wholly so callous, hence your experiences. Two chances I have given you, and, as you have shown yourself insensible to civilized requirements in both, I now wash my hands of you. You are nothing: far less than nothing. Had you shown the faintest sign of less than negative character, you had been redeemed. As a poor girl you were contemptible, as a rich one you are more so. Henceforth you must locate yourself.'

Malicious hatred and defiance flashed from Margaret's black eyes, but utterance seemed beyond her.

'I thought it best that you should know

this, Mr. Selby,' continued Mrs. Monk, with restored composure. 'You must decide now as seems best to you.'

'Will you throw me off?' cried Margaret, turning abruptly towards her lover.

The gentleman did not immediately reply.

'Was it only for my name that you wished to marry me?' she went on, scornfully. 'What is the love you have sworn to me? Lies, lies: was it all lies?'

Mrs. Monk smiled complacently. Mr. Selby looked from one to another in a state of uncertainty.

'Give the gentleman time for reflection,' said Mrs. Monk.

'Yes, I will give you my answer to-morrow,' interrupted Walter, intensely relieved by the suggestion.

'Then I despise you!' exclaimed Mar-

garet. 'You can go. I will not marry you if you kneel to me.'

'Better,' commented Mrs. Monk, in an undertone; then louder, 'But this is ridiculous. Let us end it.'

She therewith rang the bell, and the butler answered it.

'Has a Mr. Simpson arrived?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Then please to show him in here.'

An elderly gentleman of lower middle-class appearance presently entered, and Mrs. Monk, who was the presiding genius of the assembly, offered him a chair. He stroked his grey beard as he took it, adjusted his spectacles, and coughed.

'Now, Mr. Simpson, you say that you are willing to take this girl back to your household?'

'Certainly, certainly,' he replied.

'To the devil first,' shrieked Margaret, and instantly fled from the room.

Mrs. Monk laughed with real heartiness, and looking at Clare, who was near her,—

'She improves, Clare,' she said. 'But wasn't it the screech of the jay exactly? Then I have unnecessarily troubled you, Mr. Simpson. If you will kindly go on to the Peel, I shall follow you immediately.'

The lady again rang the bell.

'Very good, madam.'

As the door was opened for the gentleman to withdraw, there was a sound of unusual movements in the hall. The butler entered the library unceremoniously, and positively beckoned Mr. Walter Selby to attend him. The latter readily complied, and followed

the man from the room. Three men were carrying something up the stairs.

'What the deuce is the matter?' asked Selby. 'Has she fainted?'

And the butler told him.

It was after eight o'clock when Mrs. Monk and Clare had arrived at the Hall. Selby had been there all the evening. Mr. and Mrs. Whinstone were together in the library; Paul and the lovers in the drawing-room.

Paul had been noticeably jovial since dinner, and had spoken much of once more returning to his studies. Even when Miss Langtoft joined them, his exhilaration suffered no diminution. He was very friendly with her, and showed none of the restraint which lately had

characterised his intercourse with this young lady. At his request she sang to them, and all went pleasantly enough.

After they had been for a short time thus engaged, Paul withdrew. He had said nothing as to a prolonged absence; nevertheless, some time later, when Mrs. Monk had fetched Clare to the library, he had not returned. Mrs. Monk had once or twice regretted his absence, but all the rest were too deeply absorbed to think very much about it.

From the drawing-room, Paul had gone upstairs, and, when in a few minutes he descended, he was no longer in evening dress. He seemed to move hurriedly, and from time to time he looked about him with nervous anxiety; but nobody observed him. He got a hat, umbrella, and heavy overcoat, and left the house. In the stable-

yard he stayed to speak to the coachman who was busy there.

'We shall be ready in about a quarter-of-an-hour, Scott. Come down the front drive.'

'Very good, sir.'

It was a fine, clear evening now, but dark. Throughout the day there had been intermittent storm and sunshine, with atmosphere intensely clear, and gorgeous clouds. Nearly two hours ago the sun had sunk, golden; dipping behind a level-topped bank of deep-blue evening cloud which peeped up beyond the western hills. The zenith was now alive with stars, but between the tree-tops and the earth all was obscure.

Paul hurried through the grounds in the direction of the front gate. He glanced furtively about him, as he heard the wind

sighing from the hills, but could distinguish little. By one tree he stopped, and called out, 'Who's that?' He repeated his inquiry, but there was no response, and he went onwards. At the gateway he stopped again, and peered into the darkness.

'Where are you?' he whispered.

As there was no reply he went a short distance over the grass at each side, but still without result. After he had done so, the gate moved, and Paul could dimly perceive a figure enter. He coughed, and the figure approached him.

'Is it you?' said Paul.

'Yes.'

'It's all right. The carriage will be down directly. We will wait here, darling.'

Paul sheltered the girl in his arms as he

spoke, and she felt renewed vigour from the contact. He continued to pour encouraging words into her ear, but, had there been light to show her features, the expression upon them might possibly have surprised him. There was nothing of the ecstatic deluded maiden about Maisie. Undoubtedly she loved Paul passionately, but she was not blinded by any romantic fatuity. In her present condition of nervous tension, the particular tone of his encouragement was distasteful. She would have preferred one very much less sentimental.

For some minutes they had stood there, when Paul raised his head.

'Listen!' he said. 'I hear the horses. Don't you? Yes, they are coming. There are the lights, look! Let us walk towards them.'

As they moved to go onwards, Maisie

separated herself from her companion, and looked intently at the moving lights of the carriage. Now they were visible, and now something hid them from her view. She watched for their re-appearance with a tremulous interest, but of a sudden her attention was drawn away.

Paul was not more than a yard from her side, but it seemed to her as though a flash of light shot between them from some point immediately behind. The instant she turned she saw Paul's face illuminated by the strong rays of a lantern, every lineament distinct, to the eyes blinking in the glare, of a colour unnaturally heightened by its contrast with the surrounding blackness. Perhaps for two seconds she saw it, then there was a report, and Paul fell. All was dark again. As Maisie groped for the fallen figure, there was a

second shot immediately beside her, but she scarcely regarded it; all her energy had been expended upon the first.

She found his arm, and quickly his hand; then, by the touch, she traced upwards to his ear, but instantly she withdrew her fingers and buried them in the cold wet grass.

'Paul, are you much hurt?' she whispered, tenderly, 'do tell me—only tell me, darling!'

He breathed and uttered some sound, but nothing articulate. She turned and stared around in the darkness. The rhythm of the horses' hoofs sounded near at hand, and she could see the carriage lights approaching. Rising from her knees, she ran towards the vehicle, and at the sound of her voice the coachman stopped.

'Bring a light,' said Maisie. 'Quickly, a light.'

The man had heard the shots, and now coupled the incidents.

'Are they poachers? Why, you're a lassie surely. Take a lamp. I daurna leave the horses.'

'Give me one, and go up to the house for more help. Mr. Paul is hurt.'

Maisie took the lamp from the coachman's hand, grasping it firmly by the stem, and walked quickly across the grass again. The strong light shone all round her, showing the wet grass and the trees, and her own headless figure; her face was above the rays. As she approached the place where Paul was lying, she saw another figure, still and prostrate as he, scarcely two yards away. She looked at this one first, and recognised with a shudder —George Rutherford; then she knelt beside Paul until the men arrived.

'Shot!' muttered Selby, under his breath, when the butler had whispered to him. 'Alive? Oh, that's right.'

'What? Who?' exclaimed Clare, who had just appeared. 'She has only fainted. Where is she?'

The young lady turned to run up the stairs, but Mr. Selby touched her arm.

'It is not Margaret,' he said, and stepping with her apart he rapidly explained what had happened.

'Shot by poachers?' asked Clare, blankly. 'Was he alone?'

The butler immediately came forward to ask her if she would see Miss Winlaw.

'No, no, not now,—who saw it,—who knows anything about it?'

'Miss Winlaw,' replied the man.

'She——' but instantly checking her

amazement she bade him bring the girl in to her.

Maisie appeared, her face colourless; but in manner quite composed. Clare withdrew to the dining-room with her.

'Whatever is it, Maisie?'

'George Rutherford shot him, and then himself.'

'You saw it?'

'Yes, I alone.'

Clare looked into her face, and understood it all. By a strange impulse she took the girl in her arms, and kissed her.

'Stay here. I will be back directly, and we will go to the Peel together.'

As Clare crossed the hall, Margaret came flying down the stairs, clad for a journey.

'Ha, ha! you have killed your brother!'

she cried, triumphantly, as she darted onwards without a pause.

Clare saw the malicious sparkle of Margaret's eyes as she passed beside her, and watched her fling open the large doorway and disappear. The wind swept in, and up the stairs, with an angry sigh, and Clare herself went to shut it out.

Mrs. Whinstone was just issuing from the library door. A mother's ears are doubtless preternaturally sharp, else it would have seemed that maternal instinct alone had provided the lady with a clue to the ominous proceedings. Such nervous disquietude as Mrs. Monk's melodrama had been able to arouse in her was speedily merged in the genuine solicitude which the talk about her son inspired. She took Clare's arm at the foot of the stairs, and they ascended in company.

Mrs. Monk was still engaged with Mr. Whinstone in the library. After concluding their discussion, and hearing the reassuring opinion of the doctor upon Paul's condition, she left. That night the lady travelled to town by the mail train.

In the stable-yard Margaret had found a man unyoking the horses by the light of the carriage lamps and a lantern on the ground. He had not heard her approach, and her voice startled him.

'Stay!' she said. 'Put the horses in again instantly. You must drive me to Kidland Castle.'

'You, miss! Now?'

'Yes, immediately. I have to go for Mr. Kidland. Be quick. Tell Scott to come at once.'

The man complied with alacrity; the coachman was dragged from the conclave of servants; and Margaret set off.

For a time the young lady reclined in a corner of the carriage, tremulous but savage and resolute. It was not the paltry tragedy just enacted which had touched her; by that she was wholly unaffected, for it meant nothing to her. The crisis in her own career had annihilated the world, save as it could be made subservient to her own immediate requirements and plans. Paul, whole, would at this moment have been useless to her, hence that he chanced to be, as she from garbled hearsay thought, dead, required no special comment from her. Some doubtless it did affect: let them consider it.

The blow which she personally had received had awakened some character which lay

dormant in her, and she was conscious of a frenzied strength and daring, the whole of which she was eager to expend in violent antagonism to the constituted world. At times her eyes glared like a tiger's in the obscurity about her, and one could imagine that all her fingers were stiffened into claws in readiness for a spring. Everybody in the universe she hated and defied,—more particularly, however, her incomprehensible mother,—that the woman's tale was true, Margaret's instinct left her no room to doubt, —and the well meaning Mr. Walter Selby. As regarded this gentleman, her tact had wholly deserted her. She had in her excitement anticipated his attitude, and as it happened with a wholly mistaken judgment. At this very moment was he anxiously seeking her, firmly resolved upon an oath of eternal fidelity and

marriage indissoluble off-hand, but she was ignorant of it; the moment passed and her world was altered.

Over the dark hills they rolled, throwing their lights across the barren country, and frightening only the moorfowls in their course. Margaret would peer from time to time through the window, and see perhaps a grey stone wall illuminated, or a patch of heather and fern, presented as though from the lens of a magic lantern in the surrounding darkness. Once, after such a scrutiny, she took upon her knees a large leathern-case which she had brought with her, and opened it with a key. A wealth of jewels was immediately displayed to her eager gaze, and she gloated over them, soothed for the moment by the fascinating sight. Her fingers went over them, as though to make sure that none

were missing. She removed the trays, and so examined the whole contents, article by article. Some especial favourite, like her diamond coronet and her bracelet of exquisite sapphires, she would hold up between herself and the light, and after long gazing almost shriek with glee. This occupation served her for the rest of the journey, and not until the carriage stopped at the gate of Kidland Castle could the young lady persuade herself to conceal her treasures.

There was natural surprise at the Castle when this arrival was announced. It was after ten o'clock, and the young lady was alone. She imperiously asked for Mrs. Kidland,—she must see the lady at once. As ill-fate would have it, the lady had gone to Scotland, and Miss Kidland with

her. What! was nobody at home? Yes, Mr. Alan, but he alone. Then Mr. Alan she must see.

This gentleman presently appeared with a cigar between his fingers, and sleep unmistakably in his eyes.

'Miss Whinstone! You? Well, upon my honour!' he exclaimed, with a fist in one eye. 'Nothing wrong?'

At sight of him tears filled Margaret's eyes, and she sank upon a couch. Alan was perplexed. He was too much a gentleman to be tender to her, but the situation tried him. He took the safest course.

'Are you going to faint, Miss Whinstone? Just wait a minute. Now, do, please, and I will call the housekeeper.'

She smiled at him through her tears.

'No, no. I shall not faint. If I do, only you must be with me. I have such a lot to tell you. I feel so ill.'

She seemed indeed to be going, and Alan drew near to her.

'I must call them in.'

'No, you shall not. Do not be so unkind to me. But you must let me stay here to-night. I dare not drive back over those dark, horrible hills. Send Scott home, and give him a sovereign. I will explain it all to you when I am able.'

Alan withdrew to execute this commission, and to give further instructions on his own account for the proper treatment of Scott. Having done so, he returned to Margaret.

'Have a drop of champagne—now, do,' he said, seeing that her condition was still uncertain. 'I will get you some myself.

Don't go off. You'll be better after it.'

Mr. Kidland's treatment was effectual, and, a few minutes afterwards, Margaret consented to be entrusted to a maid that she might get her things off and otherwise make herself presentable. Whilst he was awaiting her, Alan fumbled in his pockets, and twisted and retwisted his watch-chain about his finger, in a state of unmitigated bewilderment. He was not an adept at resolving charades at any time, however favourable the conditions might be; and certainly, at the present moment, he was in no mood for making a trial of his skill. Instead, he helped himself to the champagne, and philosophically awaited the sequel.

When Margaret returned she was in full evening dress, and looked remarkably fascinating.

'I came just as I was,' she said, with a ready perception of his glances, 'and I shall never go back there—never.'

'H'm,' remarked Kidland, raising his eyebrows.

'Come and sit here, and I will tell you all about it. Are you afraid of me?' she asked, petulantly.

Alan sat down beside her, submissively.

'Oh, they have wronged me cruelly! They made me accept Selby, but *you* know I never loved him. Now I will never see him or speak to him again,—never! But I can go out into the world alone. I am not afraid. I am not hideous, am I? Look at me well! Am I, Alan?'

'By gad, no!' remarked he, with a ludicrous expression on his features.

Margaret laughed.

'You funny fellow!' she said, flippantly;

but afterwards she instantly became serious. 'I will throw them all off. I will make a world of my own. I am homeless, nameless, and I rejoice in it. I hate them all. Listen, and see if they have not all been wretches.'

Margaret forthwith laid the whole of Mrs. Monk's revelation before Mr. Kidland with feverish excitement. The gentleman's eyes were fixed upon her all the time in rapt attention. It was equal to a novel.

'That's what I have come to tell you. Could I sleep there another night? Could I touch any of their food after that? I'd rather have slept in the heather, and starved. But I knew you would help me. I knew you would take me in, if nobody else would. Was I wrong?'

The man seemed fascinated, helpless.

'Wrong? I'll do anything I can for you, old girl. It's a beastly shame; it is indeed.'

'You are a dear, kind fellow,' she said, vehemently.

'No, no. It's not that. I'm fond of you, Margaret,' said he, touching her hand and looking playfully into her face. 'I was never so far gone over a girl as I have been over you, honour bright. But this affair is the deuce of a thing. The guv-'nor, you know,' he said, sadly. 'I'd marry you to-morrow, that I would; but he'd kick me out the day after. Love in a cottage, and all that sort of thing, is all very well in its way; but, do you know, I don't think we're cut out for it. Now, do you, joking apart?'

'I'm sure I'm not.'

'Of course not. What—what are your plans, then?'

'I shall go on the stage. I am sure I can do it with some training. I will do it. I am dying to do something, just to show those creatures—those wretches, how I scorn them.'

'Come, this will do,' said Alan, tightening his hold of her hand; 'this is practical. I can help you, old girl, and I will. You shall not want for anything, never fear. I know plenty of people at the theatres. We'll go to town to-morrow. You'll come, eh?'

'I am dying to go. But what a good fellow you are to forget all my unkindness. They made me do it, and I hate them for that more than anything. The secret was —you can guess—the old woman wanted that sickly little sneak because he was heir

to a baronet. Wasn't it mean? I wish I had been stronger and defied them, but you know how fresh I was to it all. Pah!' she added, thrusting her pretty little foot far out before her, 'I will kick them from my memory. But say that you forgive me, Alan.'

Alan readily gave her the assurance, and Margaret felt satisfied.

The two sat together for a long time, in order to discuss more fully Margaret's arrangements for the future. The young lady was enthusiastic, and immediately persuaded herself that the wretched farce of a Lady Selby was dust and ashes to the glorious prospect opening now before her. She rejoiced in her liberation like a wild bird, and she flapped her wings and preened herself for flight.

This was all the news that *she* had for

Mr. Kidland; if anybody had any other of a darker kind they might communicate it to him.

Early the following morning they left the hill country, and it was not until the next day, from a London paper, that Alan learned of the tragedy at High Feldom.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WEFT.

The clock struck twelve, but still Clare and her companion were sitting over the fire in the private room of the former, as, in fact, they had sat since their return from the Hall. Having learned that Paul's wound was not of a really dangerous nature, and after a short, private interview with Mrs. Whinstone, who was henceforth to be her mother, Clare had gone with Maisie to the Peel, there to muse

upon the altered aspect of her existence with more calmness than would have been possible in the midst of unfamiliar surroundings. Clare's training was, in such a position as this, of undoubted benefit to her. Accustomed to regard the universe from a standpoint short of the absolutely positive, she was able to examine the situation more dispassionately, more philosophically than might have been possible to one more conventionally minded. She could not but think of her life-long companion with genuine affection, hence an element of pain ; but pain, perhaps, arising more from a strong sense of human pity, than from any mere egotistic requirements. It was distressing to her to think, from the warmth of her own hearth, of a beloved figure flitting to and fro in the darkness and cold without.

With the object of engaging Maisie's thoughts, Clare told her of the change, and enlarged upon it. From this their conversation had proceeded. Despite the shock which Maisie must inevitably have sustained, she continued singularly composed. She heard Clare's narrative with amazement, certainly, but with unaffected interest.

'Then you are Paul's sister, Miss Langtoft,' she had said, when the details were fully disclosed to her; 'and it is your brother to whom I have brought almost death.'

'It is my brother who is injured, but through no act of yours, Maisie.'

'Only through act of mine. I have learned many things to-night which I only half knew before.'

Without such admission, Clare had been struck by the obvious alteration in her friend. The past few hours had, as it seemed, instantaneously developed a certain intellectual maturity in her, such as prolonged education and experience by no means necessarily impart.

'That is merely supersensitiveness,' replied Clare. 'Don't think——'

Maisie laid her hand upon that of her companion.

'It is truth, indeed,' she interposed. 'The responsibility is mine entirely.'

'Maisie dear, it can't be. That could only result from your having been less than a woman, and that I will not believe.'

'Perhaps I am less than a woman. But if you mean by that that I sought him,

that I enticed him, you are right, Miss Langtoft, in not believing it.'

'How else could you be responsible, dear?'

They were looking into each other's face.

'The man is always blamed in such a case,' said Maisie; 'but do you think it is fair?'

'I think it is generally the girl that is deceived.'

'Yes, if there is deception. But—but do you think there often is? Do you think that I was deceived?' Masie asked, impulsively, and with an immediate heightening of colour.

'I should not have thought Paul likely to do it; but men are quite inexplicable. He might no doubt have married you.'

The other flushed more deeply.

'You are his sister, Miss Langtoft, and will have to live with him in future. I must tell you the truth, for it will alter your thoughts of him. But for this I should have told nobody. He never deceived me; he implored me constantly to marry him, and he would have done it; but I was not going away with him to be married. I loved *him*, but I was unfitted for his kind of life. You know it, and in a very short time he would have found it out, and then what would have remained to us?—to him especially?'

There was an earnestness in the speaker's manner which held Clare's attention.

'How would his friends have received me?' she proceeded, warmly. 'How is a girl received who, as they would say,

steals a place to which she has not been born? You know, Miss Langtoft, what it would be. Not one lady in a thousand is like you. If more were, I would have married him, and in a year or two he should not have been discontented, and I should have——'

Clare did not make any remark, although Maisie paused in the middle of her sentence.

'So never blame him, Miss Langtoft; he is completely free from blame. I knew what I was doing, and chose to do it. Why I did so, even you cannot understand. Do not think that it was simply love. If it had been that only, I should have been blind to everything else, and have married him, to wake up afterwards. It was far more than that: it was life

itself. Life suddenly shone before me, just as I have seen the sun shine into a desolate valley when all round were dark clouds. To be in the light and warmth for a few minutes was all I wanted, because I knew that it was all I could ever have. I should have lived for those minutes, and the warmth of them would have warmed me till I died. I thought I could gain it without harm to anybody, but I see now that I was wrong.'

A short silence followed, broken at length by Clare, who watched her companion's eyes as they were fixed upon the fire.

'I do understand it, Maisie,' she said, and for the first time throughout the night's experiences Maisie's tears fell.

It was nearly an hour later before they separated for the night.

This night passed and many more, bringing several changes.

Now winter was on the hills,—a kind, crisp, and sparkling winter, in no way ashamed of those more genial traits which afford a glimpse of kinship with his sister spring. By the shaded banks of the river, all day long, the sharp-edged fringes of ice crept stealthily outwards to the current and never paused. Before the sun had gone behind the south-west hills all the earth was crisp again.

One morning of this time Paul and his sister were issuing from the gateway of Feldom Hall. In aspect they seemed little changed, despite the three years' interval, only it was noticeable that Clare (so she

must be to the end) still displayed in her attire some signs of mourning. For twelve months past Paul had been the squire of High Feldom.

They had been engaged in desultory conversation, but for a few minutes there had been silence, the young lady's eyes having been wandering over the wintry prospect. She would look at the bolder heights as they rose faultlessly smooth and white against the clear sky, whiter far and smoother than the long-drawn bar of cloud and the upper spray hovering in the space above, which, as she thought, the mountains themselves seemed to have thrown off. Then she would glance at the smaller hills, noticing how their surface was tinted by the brown bracken and the bent which pierced the covering, and seeing here and there a stone or dark-

green knob of gorse. But she said nothing about all this to her present companion. After going some little distance along the road, they parted,—Paul turning off by a field-path to a house on the edge of the east plantation, and Clare keeping onwards to the village. She passed through it, between the pine-woods beyond, and was soon at the vicarage.

Mr. Crook opened his study-door at the sound of the visitor's voice in the hall, and the young lady entered.

'I was at that moment wishing for you,' exclaimed the clergyman, cheerily.

'I hope that all your wishes may be fulfilled as easily, Mr. Crook.'

The little man shrugged his shoulders silently, as Clare took the seat which he had offered to her.

'Your wish first, then,' said the lady, looking at the table.

'On no account. The purest triviality, I assure you. You see,' he added, pointing to the open quartos.

The vicar was evidently still immersed in his old pleasant occupations, and, as one might have thought, free from all subjection to the annoyances of ordinary life.

'You know that Maisie came back a few days ago, and is living with Mrs. Carr?' said Clare.

'I did,' was the quiet response.

Mr. Crook looked at his fair visitor, and she paused, expecting more from him.

'Yes, Miss Whinstone, you are right,' he continued, as though answering some

unexpressed suggestion of hers. 'I am interested in her welfare. I am thankful that she has come back. Once for all, to you alone let me speak. My feelings towards her have been known to you, and—and the shock of circumstances no doubt suspected. Probably Paul has not spoken to you on the subject. I wronged him grievously, and, upon learning that I had done so, I naturally did what I could to repair the injustice. How I learnt it is for you alone to know. In my misconstruction of Paul's action, since Maisie left us I have persistently sought her. Not until twelve months ago did I meet with any success. Then I went to her,—in a town in Yorkshire,—and asked her to be my wife. Her reply startled, nay, inexpressibly shocked me.'

'She explained her attitude to me before she went,' said Clare.

'Anything but that I could—but I must not speak of it. It is scarce credible of any woman, but of that one—! It has thrown me back; all my human ideals are shattered. With redoubled thankfulness I cling elsewhere. But I suppose I am a hide-bound parson?' he added, with an inquiring glance at his visitor.

'You wrong me, Mr. Crook,' said Clare, seriously.

'I do! I am glad of it, my dear friend. This present-day vaunted emancipation from the refinements of ideal morality is disastrous; especially so in that it is an adjunct of the most intellectually prominent amongst us. But, be cultured how they will, it is surely but a

reverting to a state of nature, a state of animalism.

> "Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
> And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good."

It is the *more* which now-a-days we seek to annihilate. But no more o' this,' exclaimed the clergyman, vivaciously. 'I have a letter from Hugh; he comes to me to-morrow.'

'Yes, I have heard too. Did he tell you of his interview with Mrs. Monk last week? She is a strange creature. I have told you of her persistent refusal to sell us the Peel property. Her obstinacy is now explained. She sent for Hugh, and presented him with the title-deeds and a conveyance of the place to himself as a wedding gift.'

'Remarkable, certainly; but nothing would surprise me.'

'And she has got that child altogether now; the mother died.'

'H'm!' remarked the vicar, with less decided approval.

Hugh arrived the following evening, and spent a few days with the vicar, to their mutual satisfaction. Having been once launched, Winlaw's progress had been unwavering, and by nobody had it been watched with more kindly interest than by Mr. Crook. The clergyman, by nature and education a refined moralist, had felt at the outset some misgivings upon the subject of Hugh's intellectual attitude. Mere artistic instincts as divorced from the glow of emotional ideals—a phase of development which Mr. Crook deemed to be perilously widespread at the present time—were in the clergyman's eyes a de-

lusion and a snare. All work must have some definite moral or material motive. The insensate ploughman, with his merely instinctive lapses from intelligence and morality, was a vastly preferable person in Mr. Crook's estimation to one of the above highly civilized endowments. Winlaw's beginning had betrayed to the vicar's searching scrutiny evidence of the prevailing infection, but latterly the sensitive little man had persuaded himself of a highly gratifying modification of the adverse symptoms. Their intimate intercourse during Hugh's visit to the vicarage more than confirmed the clergyman in his sanguine anticipations.

One evening especially afforded him solid groundwork for his suspicions. Clare was with them, and they had talked of many things; ultimately of some rural

measures just then engaging popular attention.

'Too material; too material,' Mr. Crook had suggested.

'Certainly, if it were possible to exist without the material,' said Hugh.

'What I object to is these fellows approaching rural affairs from their own gross urban standpoint. I hold that the two are distinct, and that every step towards the assimilation of rural and urban civilization is a step in a demoralizing direction; that is, of course, urban civilization being such as it now is.'

'Partly so, but you are an uncompromising idealist, Mr. Crook.'

'How so?' exclaimed the vicar, fiercely.

'Because you constitute the artist's conception of rural life—which is in reality an interpretation merely—as your foun-

dation of fact, and from those false premises build up your structure.'

'No, no.'

Hugh smiled complacently.

'The fallacy is universal,' he went on, 'and puts a difficulty in the way of handling the subject with effect. *You* ought to know better, Mr. Crook; in townspeople it is not surprising, for they are never long enough in the country to be aroused from their idealism. It is of course the towns which institute the general opinion upon every topic, and in rural affairs the public sentiment is built upon an acquaintance with artistic interpretation alone and wholly without regard to any real presentment of the facts.'

'I can't admit all this,' asserted the vicar. 'Of course there are many evils to remedy in the country as elsewhere,

but mainly material. Pastoral life always was the ideal life, say what you will.'

'By all means an *ideal* pastoral life is the highest life here attainable, but never the pastoral life which in reality has existed. Proof of this is not wanting through the centuries. Don't ignore the realists so persistently. Take a course of them this year from Piers the Plowman down to Crabbe. You draw all your inferences from Wordsworth and Ruskin. Such men, artists who long to be social forces, defeat their own ends by assuming a false position. They tell you that rural occupations have such and such desirable effect upon the soul of man, instead of saying that they *ought* to have such effect. As a mere matter of fact, it is surely abundantly proved that rural life never had such effect.'

'But it has, sir. Are not they themselves standing proofs of it?'

'They! Yes, certainly; but surely you will not deduce a rule from that! Had all our population the susceptibilities of poets and artists very many problems would be solved.'

'There is something in what you say, Hugh,' said the vicar, candidly. 'I see what you are driving at. In short, you mean that cultivated people are instinctively in love with country life, and are therefore unable dispassionately to criticize their mistress.'

'Most aptly put, Mr. Crook; that is what I mean.'

'But then life becomes intolerable without idealism.'

'Certainly, but idealism must not stand in the way of realisation. It is to turn

our idealism into realism that we ought all to work, and to do that one must first have the eyes open. If rural affairs were in very fact such as idealists interpret them, they would supply such a leaven as moralists have not had to their hands in the whole history of human effort.'

'Yes, yes, Hugh. Put your hand to it, my man,' exclaimed the clergyman, jumping from his chair. 'Speak out, speak out.'

Thus they talked for a long time, Clare listening for the most part in observant silence. When Hugh returned from his walk to the Hall, the discussion was continued far into the night.

The road was hard as stone again, and

the black tree-tops stood out clear against the stars. There was no moon.

'I feel sure that he is resolute,' said Clare to her companion; 'and rightly so. He will win. Mark my word, Hugh, within twelve months she will be his wife.'

'And you are never wrong.'

'You have warmed the little parson's heart,' Clare said, presently. 'Isn't it a delight to see him? He was terribly suspicious of you some time ago.'

'Because he didn't know of my anchorage. You once bade me preserve my heart; do you think I can ever forget that? But it is not I that preserve it: it is not I that do anything. Of all men I should know what a humanizing influence can do. We must live here, Clare. This place is *you*

to me. It seems to me that what womanhood should be to the heart of the individual man, the country and its attributes should be to the heart of a nation. With a pastoral element fulfilling its purpose and a womanhood fulfilling hers, what a prospect would there open out to us!'

'You must point it out, Hugh.'

'I! Every word of mine comes from you, my Clare, and always must. Good-night.'

THE END.

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